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ABSTRACT

Reasons why some students complete further education (FE) and others drop-out were examined in a study involving a sample of 9,000 students and staff from 31 inner city, urban, and rural FE colleges throughout the United Kingdom. Data were collected from the following sources: interviews with FE college managers, staff, and students; review of data and pertinent internal document at each college, and survey of current and withdrawn students. It was concluded that students are more likely to drop out if they fit into one of the following categories: believe that they not have been placed in the most appropriate course; applied to college late; have difficulty making friends and/or settling in at the beginning of their course; are less (compared with their peers) satisfied with the quality of teaching, their course timetable, and/or available help getting a job; are male; have difficult financial circumstances; and have their fees waived or reduced. Strategies for colleges, funding and inspection agencies, and government agencies seeking to reduce dropout rates were identified. (Contains 41 references and 35 figures. Appended are discussions of the following: validity of the student survey sample, variations between colleges, and other research on retention.) (MN)

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FEDA Further Education Development Agency

9,000 voices:
student persistence and drop-out in further education

Paul Martinez and Felicity Munday

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Paul Martinez and Felicity Munday

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Particular thanks are due to the team of consultants who conducted most of the meetings and produced a consultancy report on which this report is partly based. As well as the present authors, the consultants included:

Tricia Bailey
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We have endeavoured to make sense of a huge volume of sometimes contradictory evidence. We have tried to be judicious in our writing but remain responsible for any errors which remain.

Summary

This is the largest study of persistence and drop-out which has ever been undertaken in the UK and comprises a survey of the views of some 9,000 students and staff in 31 colleges. It confirms studies done in individual colleges to the effect that students are more likely to drop out if they:

- do not feel they have been placed on the most appropriate course
- applied to college late
- find it difficult to make friends
- find it difficult to settle in at the beginning of their course
- are less satisfied (than current students) that their course is interesting
- are less satisfied with the quality of teaching
- are less satisfied with their course timetable
- are less satisfied with help either to get a job or to go to university
- are male
- have difficult financial circumstances (older students) or family circumstances (younger students)
- have their fees waived or reduced.

These are not, however, factors operating in isolation. Previous research shows that the reasons for drop-out (and persistence) are complex, multiple and inter-related. Students continually weigh the costs and benefits of completion and this process starts even before they enrol. If the 'scales' tip too far towards the costs, they will withdraw.

The research demonstrates, second, that there are substantial differences between colleges. All of the above generalisations are subject to wide variations between colleges. What will be an issue in one college is by no means true of a second. Indeed, data aggregated at national level can sometimes conceal as much as it reveals.

Third, the report provides substantial evidence to challenge or disprove some widely held beliefs that:

- drop-out is largely caused by the personal circumstances of students
- initial student expectations of college are good predictors of persistence or drop-out
- early withdrawal is strongly linked to the quality of college facilities or equipment
- students mainly leave college to take up employment opportunities.

In relation, finally, to college information and quality systems:

- measures to improve curriculum design, pedagogy and teacher-student and student-student relationships will have a greater impact on retention than measures to improve accommodation or equipment
- far more attention needs to be paid to the analysis, interpretation and research of colleges' own circumstances
- local research will benefit from internal (within college) and external (between college) comparisons
- many current student evaluation procedures will not provide useful information to improve retention
- less precise but more action-oriented mechanisms for making early and formative evaluations will be a more useful basis for improvement.

Chapter 1

General introduction and research context

This work represents the largest piece of research on student persistence and drop-out ever undertaken in the United Kingdom for any education sector. Over 8,500 students completed lengthy questionnaires and more than 500 students, teachers, managers and other college staff took part in meetings and discussions.

Thirty-three (33) colleges were involved and the report is based on information from 31 of them. Research in the other two was completed too late to be included here. The work is premised on a number of findings from previous research (see Appendix 3):

- causes of non-completion vary between and within colleges
- many colleges have poor or inadequate information systems and, in consequence, unclear understandings of their own strengths and weaknesses in relation to student retention
- colleges have more substantial opportunities to influence student retention than has sometimes been supposed
- there is often a gap between student and staff perceptions and, for that matter, between the perceptions of managers and other staff
- there is often a considerable amount of useful information which is held by colleges but not acted on.

Objectives

The objectives of the project were defined at two levels. At the college level, we wanted to help participating colleges to analyse and understand their own situation with a view to making improvements. We therefore wanted to:

- research the local causes of student persistence and drop-out
- review the effectiveness of any measures already put in place by the college
- evaluate the key college management mechanisms: quality procedures and the college's management information system (MIS)
- make recommendations for action.

At the more general level, we wanted to:

- conduct a reasonably definitive study of the causes of student completion and drop-out
- create a database which would be sufficiently large to enable detailed and sensitive analyses
- draw some general conclusions about the effectiveness of key college management mechanisms
- make general recommendations to improve student retention rates.

Methodology

In order to achieve these objectives, we adopted a methodology based on individual college consultancies. Each participating college facilitated access to managers, staff and students for the consultant, provided relevant data and copies of appropriate internal documentation, and undertook a survey of current and withdrawn students.

FEDA staff produced reports for the consultant which identified significant patterns of completion and non-completion, and investigated the relationships between 'hard' data (the where and when of student completion and non-completion) with 'soft' data (student perceptions of college, reasons given for non-completion). FEDA staff also processed the college-administered survey of current and withdrawn students and identified significant patterns which emerged from this survey.

A confidential report was prepared for each college, based on the information provided and on qualitative research conducted over two days in each college. The current report is based on the 31 consultants' reports and on the student surveys, the results of which have been combined to form one large database.

In general, the methodology worked reasonably well. Putting to one side logistical problems caused by unanticipated delays, the main strengths of the methodology included:

- a focus on issues of direct relevance to each participating college
- triangulation of evidence from different sources and including both qualitative and quantitative data
- the generation of a reasonably sophisticated analysis of the issues at each college
- a detailed set of recommendations based on the analysis.

The main substantive difficulties included:

- contacting withdrawn students to get them to complete the survey: postal returns were very poor and telephone interviews were usually necessary
- the production of reports from MIS or from their Individual Student Record (ISR), because data was not being captured in the first place, because of software problems or because of a lack of computing capability: we had to create a programme to manipulate ISR data since a number of colleges were unable to supply it except in the format provided to FEFC.

Participating colleges

The colleges which participated in the project were mainly urban, English or Welsh, and further education (FE) or tertiary. Using a fairly arbitrary classification by catchment area:

- 4 colleges were based in the inner city
- 17 were urban
- 6 were based in small towns
- 4 were rural.

Twenty-five colleges were English and six were Welsh. All but two were general further education or tertiary colleges and those two were sixth form colleges. No specialist colleges or adult education (AE) services were included.

Focus of research

The majority of colleges (19/31) chose to focus their research on younger, full-time students. Only one college elected to focus on adult students. The remaining 11 colleges looked at a cross-section of their courses which usually included a substantial proportion of full-time courses with predominantly younger students. Currently some 80% of students on council-funded provision in English and Welsh colleges are adults, over 90% of whom are studying part-time. This means that the views of adult part-time students are under-represented here. As we shall see, however, there was a sufficiently large number of adult students to draw some general conclusions with a degree of confidence.

Definitions

As in earlier work, we treat the terms persistence, completion and retention as more or less synonymous as we do their opposites – drop-out, non-completion and early withdrawal. Unless otherwise specified, early withdrawal or drop-out includes students who do not complete the courses or programmes of study for which they originally enrolled and who leave college. Successful completion, therefore, includes students who complete their courses/programmes, even if they do not achieve their qualification aims. Non-completion includes all students who fail to complete, irrespective of their reasons, and includes students who leave because of a change in their employment status.

The implications of the above are that the quantitative data presented here will not be directly comparable to data gathered by the English Further Education Funding Council (FEFC(E)) based on the ISR. The data will, in fact, look worse since it reflects outcomes in relation to initial enrolments, rather than in relation to status on the first FEFC census date: 1 November.

Outcomes for courses lasting two or more years will also look worse since the definition used here explores retention over the whole course. The figures published by FEFC, to date, take each year as a discrete entity, thus ignoring summer leavers and exaggerating retention (since year two retention is invariably better than year one). The argument for our approach is overwhelming, however, in that it reflects the actual concerns and experiences of students, teachers and managers in the adult and further education sectors.

Relationship to other research

At the risk of over-simplification, there are six main types of research which provide a context and a background for the present work:

- studies of individual colleges, centres or adult education services
- the Youth Cohort Study
- publications by funding and inspection agencies
- large-scale research into the causes of drop-out
- qualitative research on strategies to improve retention
- secondary sources based on some combination of the above.

Detailed references for each of the above are provided in Appendix 3.

This current project is unique in that it:

- **constitutes, by some distance, the largest research project yet undertaken on the causes of student drop-out and student persistence**
- **employs a mixed approach which combines the strengths of a large-scale research project with detailed qualitative research in individual colleges.**

2 Chapter

Statistical and survey data

Introduction

The qualitative research was supported by three sorts of quantitative information:

- college ISRs
- college MIS records
- a survey of over 8,500 students across the 31 colleges.

In order to contextualise and control the qualitative research, the ISR and MIS data sets were used to explore patterns of persistence and drop-out while the survey generated:

- comparisons between the attitudes and perceptions of current and withdrawn students
- information on patterns of persistence and drop-out which complemented those derived from ISR/MIS data sets.

The ISR data sets are subject to certain qualifications. They take no account of drop-out if it occurs before the first census date or after the third census date. They also under-estimate drop-out from programmes which last for two or more years. ISRs capture drop-out separately for each year, rather than cumulatively over the whole course or programme. They shed no light

at all on 'drop-out' which occurs between first contact and enrolment. On the other hand, these large comprehensive data sets provide a reasonable basis to:

- identify patterns in persistence and drop-out
- check that the sample groups are representative.

The student survey was administered by participating colleges using questionnaires designed by FEDA. Over 7,500 students completed the standard questionnaire: 6,020 were continuing or had already completed their programme, 1,497 had withdrawn from their programme and left college. The 7,500 respondents were drawn from 28 colleges. A further 1,000 students in three colleges completed either a pilot version of the questionnaire or a questionnaire designed specifically for A-level students. Except where indicated, the survey data which is reviewed in this chapter relates to the 7,500 students who completed the standard questionnaire.

Many colleges found it difficult to get withdrawn students to complete the questionnaire. Postal responses were poor by comparison with responses to telephone calls.

In a minority of colleges, the number of withdrawn respondents was quite small (between 20 and 40) and we draw attention to aspects of the analysis which need to be treated with caution. Fortunately, in almost every case, consultants were able to triangulate the survey outcomes by reference to qualitative research, ISR or MIS data. A detailed discussion of the validity of the sample is contained in Appendix 1.

Most of the colleges participating in the project made comprehensive MIS and/or ISR data available. These data sets related either to the whole college population or to a sub-set of students on whom the college had chosen to focus. Almost all the sub-sets were full-time, full-year, usually younger students. Where relevant, comparisons are made with national data from the latest English ISR available to FEDA (FEFC, 1997a, d and e).

The volume of data is large, partly because of the increasing sophistication of college MIS systems, partly because of the complexity of the reporting requirements specified by funding bodies (and hence the ISR) and partly because of the length and complexity of the survey instrument. For this reason, this chapter seeks to answer one basic question:

- What can we infer from the data about the reasons for student persistence or drop-out?

In order to answer this question, the material in this chapter is organised around the following issues:

- What patterns of persistence and drop-out emerge from the statistical information? What do they tell us about the causes of persistence and drop-out? How does data from this project compare with available national data?
- How do respondents perceive and evaluate their experience of college and what does this tell us about their reasons for staying or withdrawing?
- What is the relationship between initial expectations and subsequent continuation or withdrawal?
- What do students say that they liked most and liked least about their experience at college? How do these judgements relate to other evaluations and what further light do they shed on reasons for continuing or abandoning programmes of study?
- Do the perceptions and evaluations of respondents differ according to their age? If there are differences, what further light does this throw on drop-out and persistence?
- Do students make different evaluations of their experience of college depending on whether they are participating in courses with high, intermediate or low retention rates? If the evaluations are different, how does this change our interpretation of reasons for drop-out or persistence?
- Are A-level students different? Withdrawal rates from subjects are often higher than withdrawal rates from college. When A-level students withdraw from courses but stay in college, is this for similar reasons as withdrawal from college or are other factors at work?

A note on statistics

In the discussion of the survey data which follows, a distinction is made between 'statistical significance' and significance or importance. 'Statistical significance' means that, taking into account the size of the sample and the degree of variance in responses, we are 95% confident that patterns in survey responses would be replicated in the target student population as a whole. On the other hand, the differences between, say, the evaluations of current and withdrawn students might be very small. Where this is the case, the difference might be 'statistically significant' and yet, for the purposes of differentiating withdrawn from current students, insignificant or unimportant.

The validity of the sample and its representative nature are discussed in Appendix 1.

Demographic patterns

Gender

In most of the colleges, men were over-represented and women were under-represented among the groups of withdrawn students. The bias was not particularly large, accounting typically for only for one or two percentage points, but it was noticeable. This replicates English national data from 1994-5 (FEFC, 1997a) and means that male students are slightly more likely to drop out than female students.

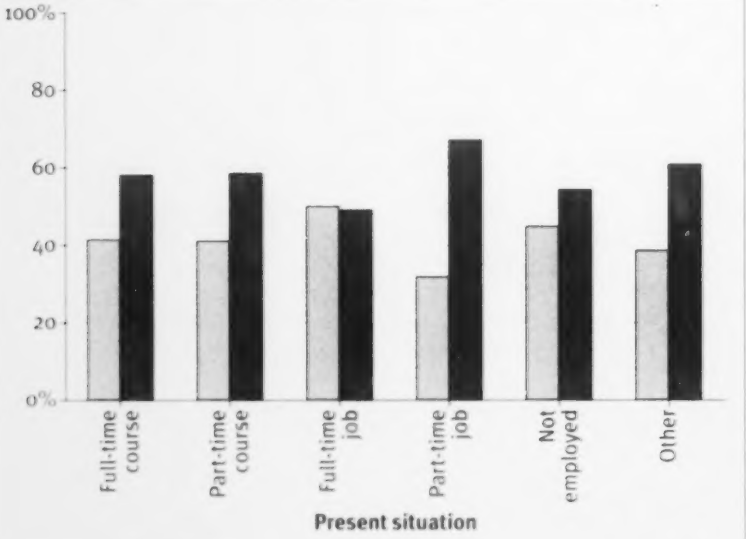
The qualitative evidence sheds no real light on the reasons for this. Anecdotally, three main sorts of reason have been suggested:

- this represents a continuation into FE of the widely reported under-performance by young men at school
- young men are disadvantaged and young women advantaged by a 'feminisation' of the curriculum (decline in traditional male areas of the curriculum, assessment by portfolio, and modular, as opposed to linear, assessment)
- young men are subject to a greater 'pull' towards employment opportunities.

The first and the second propositions are plausible and could usefully be explored by further research. There is some evidence concerning the 'pull' of employment for young men, from the survey. Destination data is available for 1,360 withdrawn students (600 male and 760 female). Male students were more likely than female students to have taken up full-time employment. Female students were more likely to have gone to a new full-or part-time course or part-time employment. The details are set out in Figure 1 on the next page.

Even with such a general trend, exceptions can be found. In two large urban colleges, women were actually over-represented among withdrawn students.

Figure 1 Present situation of withdrawn students, by gender



Ethnicity

In most of the colleges producing MIS data (16/20), the ethnicity of students did not appear to affect persistence and drop-out to any significant degree. In the four colleges with a relationship, it was not uniform:

- in one large urban college Pakistani, Bangladeshi and 'other Asian' students were over-represented among withdrawn students; white students were under-represented
- in a second white and 'black other' students were over-represented among withdrawn students; black Caribbean under-represented
- in a third Pakistani and Indian students were over-represented, white students under-represented
- in one medium-sized urban college black students were over-represented; Indian students under-represented.

At first sight, this seems to conflict with evidence at national level from the English ISR (FEFC, 1997a). This suggests that black Caribbean and black other students tend to have higher withdrawal rates, particularly 16-18 year old male students, while full-time Indian or Chinese 16-18 year olds and white part-time adult students have particularly low withdrawal rates.

The difference is perhaps more apparent than real. Because of the large numbers involved, the English ISR data on ethnicity and withdrawal is disaggregated into younger and older, full- and part-time students (FEFC 1997a). If this data is re-aggregated, some of the apparent differences are reduced. For example, high rates of withdrawal among full-time adult students from Pakistani communities will be balanced by a much lower rate for full-time 16-18 year old students from the same communities.

A further problem relates to issues of causality: black Caribbean and black other students are widely reported to under-achieve at school. Even if such groups are over-represented among withdrawn students, does the phenomenon relate to ethnicity or to lower achievement or to a less satisfactory experience of education, carried forward from school?

What we can say with some certainty is that in most of the project colleges, ethnicity did not appear to influence drop-out in a very significant way, and where it did, it operated somewhat differently across the four colleges

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involved. The implication is that national trends do not operate uniformly across colleges and that **variations in drop-out between different ethnic groups at the institutional level will be greater than at the national level.**

Mode of attendance

Differences between colleges in respect of drop-out by mode of attendance were even more striking. They varied from no apparent effect (four colleges) to quite substantial variations (17 colleges).

The variation, moreover, was often contrary to intuition and expectation. Thus, it might be expected that evening-only and part-time, non-released students would have relatively poor retention rates while, for different reasons, open-learning and part-time released students would have better retention rates. From national data for England (FEFC, 1997b and e), we might expect slightly better continuation rates for part- than for full-time students.

While some colleges showed this sort of pattern, others were very different. Variations include:

- proportionately lower drop-out rates for full-time, full-year courses; higher for part-time, non-released courses
- lower drop-out rates for full-time, full-year courses; higher for evening-only and part-time released courses
- lower drop-out rates for part-time released and evening-only courses; higher drop-out rates for full-time, full-year and part-time, non-released courses
- lower drop-out rates for part-time, non-released and open learning; higher for full-time, full-year and evening-only courses
- lower drop-out rates for open learning and part-time released; higher rates for full-time, full-year, evening-only and part-time non-released courses.

Again, the implication is that **variations in patterns of persistence and drop-out by mode of attendance will be more pronounced at college than at national level.**

Additional support units (ASUs)

According to English data at national level, students for whom the college makes special provision and claims additional support units (ASUs), are more likely to complete their programmes than students for whom the college does not claim (FEFC, 1997a and d).

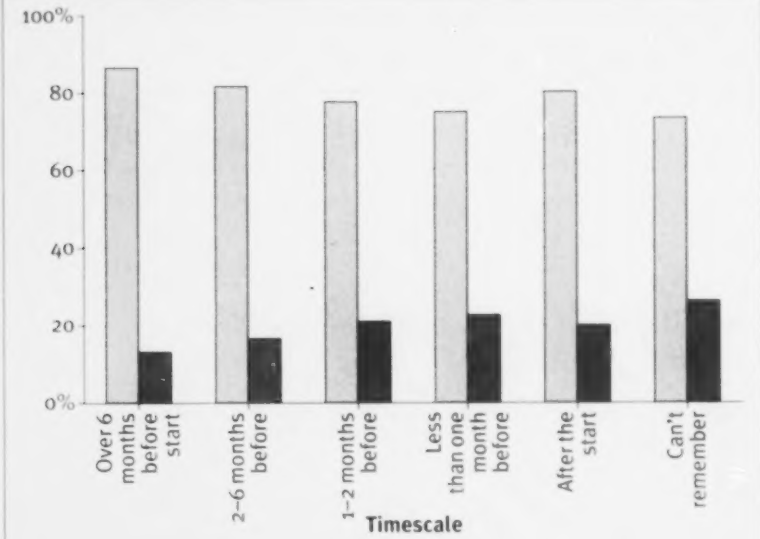
This pattern was reproduced in virtually all the project colleges for which data was available. Perhaps the most striking feature of ASUs was the apparent diversity of practice in making such claims. Most colleges were claiming ASUs for between 1.1 and 3.9% of their student population. One college was not claiming any ASUs at all. Four colleges were claiming ASUs for 10% or more of their students (within the scope of the consultancies) and one was claiming ASUs for 31% of such students.

Date of application

The 'last in, first out' rule is plausible and widely asserted. According to this view, better organised, more committed and more highly motivated students apply early. Their less well-organised and less motivated counterparts apply late and are at more risk of dropping out.

For the first time our survey provides strong empirical evidence to support this view. The survey question about date of application was answered by 1,435 students who had withdrawn. Students who had applied six months or more before the start of their course were least likely to drop out. Although the relationship was less strong, students who had applied between 2 and 6 months before the start, were also less likely to drop out. The students who were proportionately most likely to withdraw had applied less than one month before the start of their course or, alternatively, 'couldn't remember'. Students applying one-to-two months before, or after the start of their course, were also over-represented among withdrawn students. Figure 2 shows the survey response.

Figure 2 Student status, by date of application/start of course



This issue appears to be significant at both the institutional and national level. **The application date does seem to be related to the incidence of withdrawal, but patterns vary from college to college.** To give some examples from colleges in the project:

- In a college which surveyed mainly adult students, withdrawn students were over-represented among students who applied six months or more before the course and under-represented in the group which applied two-to-six months before the course began.
- In a college which concentrated on full-time two-year courses, withdrawn students were over-represented among those who had applied after the start and one-to-two months before the start, but under-represented among students who applied less than one month before.
- In a college looking at a cross-section of courses, withdrawn students were under-represented among students who applied one-to-two months in advance but over-represented among those who applied less than one month in advance.

A further qualification is that students on full-time, full-year courses apply earlier than students with other modes of attendance. Just under half (49.2%) of all respondents applied for their courses two or more months before they began. For full-time, full-year students, this figure rises to 56.5%. The relationship between early application and completion is, moreover, less good for full-time, full-year students. The earlier applicants are still more likely to complete, but among full-time, full-year students, there is a relatively larger proportion of students who apply early but who still drop-out.

The general implications are:

- The date of application can provide a useful indicator of a student being at risk of early withdrawal.
- Over one in four of the students (27.6%) was applying for their courses less than a month before they started or after their start. Given the emphasis of the research (younger, full-time students), this is surprising.

- At the college level, much guidance and support has been offered to potential students. These findings suggest that at national level there needs to be a more determined and co-ordinated strategy to promote early and well-informed applications.
- The most vulnerable students are likely to apply less than two months before the start of their course and, in general, students who apply less than one month before may be most 'at risk'.
- The relationship between application date and early withdrawal varies between colleges.
- The relationship between application date and early withdrawal varies between mode of attendance: full-time students are more likely to apply early; date of application is a less good predictor of completion for full-time students than for other modes of attendance
- Because of the apparent significance of the issue and the importance of local variation, colleges will need to undertake their own research.

Destinations

It is often asserted that a combination of student poverty (the 'push') and local employment opportunities (the 'pull') gives rise to a substantial amount of drop-out.

We have argued elsewhere that it is not necessarily so. Decisions to persist in or withdraw from a course are complex and have many causes; taking up employment may also represent dissatisfaction with being a student (Martinez, 1995).

A similar question has been debated quite exhaustively in relation to school-leavers where high local unemployment was argued either to depress staying-on rates (students chase opportunities to work) or exaggerate them (students stay on for want of an alternative). For school leavers, the most authoritative study, with the largest evidence base, concluded that there was no demonstrable relationship between staying-on rates and local labour market conditions, having accounted for all other variables (Gray et al., 1993).

The present survey suggests, however, that **take-up of employment, particularly full-time, by young, full-time students is quite significant**. It also suggests that there are substantial variations between colleges.

Figures 3 and 4 show the aggregate data for the survey. Just under one third of all withdrawn respondents progressed to full-time employment. The equivalent percentage for part time employment was 15.3%. Among the other respondents just over 1 in 5 was neither training nor working.

Figure 3 Destination of withdrawn respondents, by number and percentage

Destination	Number	%
Full-time course elsewhere	181	11.3
Part-time job	239	14.9
Part-time course of education / training	109	6.8
Full-time job	519	32.4
Not employed	327	20.4
Other	226	14.2
Total responses	**1,601**	**100**

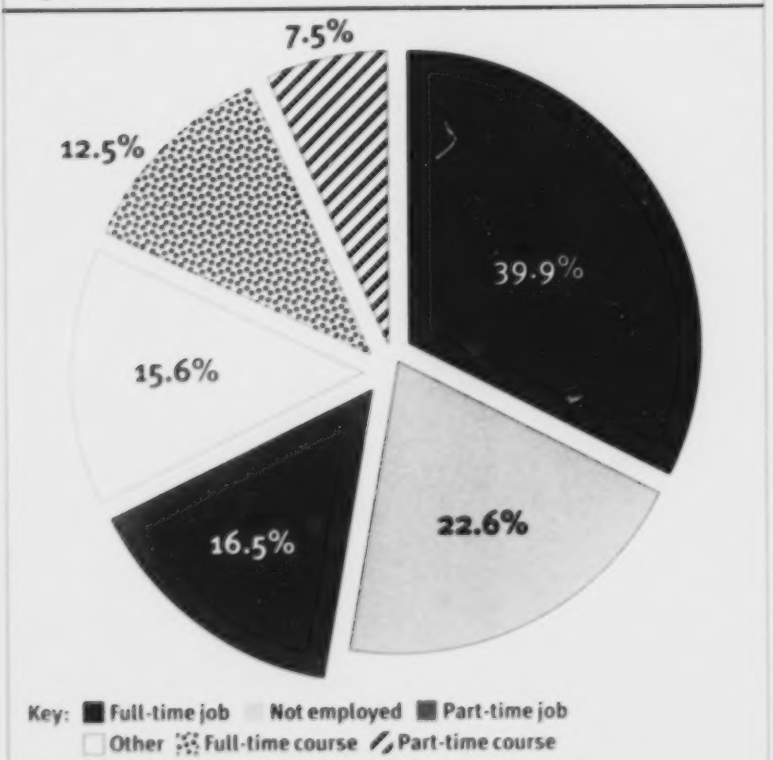
The survey also tends to confirm that **destination data must be interpreted with care and that withdrawals to take up employment are not necessarily prompted by student poverty**.

Students were asked to agree or disagree with two statements:

I have not experienced financial hardship during the course.

I received enough financial help and guidance from college.

Figure 4 Present situation of withdrawn students



Note: the pie chart shows responses by student; since some students indicated more than one destination, the percentages sum to more than 100%.

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They were invited to use a 5-point rating scale where the mid-point 3 equals neutrality; 5 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree. We expected to find that students whose responses indicated greater hardship would be more likely to opt for employment but in fact, **the destination of withdrawn students cannot be inferred from their response to questions about financial hardship and assistance**. Figure 5 sets this out in more detail.

Figure 5 Full-time full year courses: destinations of withdrawn students and financial hardship

Withdrawn student destination	Level of agreement (mean scores)	
	No financial hardship	Enough financial help
Full-time course	2.92	2.88
Part-time job	2.94	2.78
Part-time course of education/training	2.8	2.98
Full-time job	2.91	2.71
Not employed	2.87	2.76
Other	2.92	2.92

The destinations of withdrawn students were also analysed by reference to mode of attendance. In particular, we wanted to see whether full-time employment would be a relatively more popular destination among withdrawn, full-time students. In fact, the opposite was the case. Compared with withdrawn students with other modes of attendance (see Figure 3), students who had withdrawn from full-time courses were slightly more likely to go to another full-time course (14.3%), part-time job (16.1%) or to be unemployed (21.6%). They were slightly less likely to have gone to a full-time job (31.2%) or to a part-time course (5.5%) than other withdrawn students.

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In terms of variations between colleges, a spectrum can be identified with strong preferences for employment at one end and for education (albeit at an alternative institution) at the other. In a college at the employment end of the spectrum, full- or part-time employment accounted for just under two-thirds of the destinations of withdrawn students; full-time education or training elsewhere accounted for around 5% and students who were neither employed nor in education accounted for around 20%.

In a college at the education end of the spectrum, by contrast, education elsewhere accounted for around 40% of destinations, full- or part-time employment dropped to around 30% and students who were neither employed nor in education comprised some 20% of withdrawn respondents.

Fee remission

It is often asserted that students who pay full fees are more likely to persevere and complete their courses than students whose fees are waived or reduced. Indeed, some adult education studies have demonstrated an almost perverse relationship between complaining and completing, where the courses with more complaints or the lowest degree of satisfaction have the highest completion rates (Rowles, 1985).

National data from the FEFC(E) provides some support for this view. For 1994/5, retention rates (as defined by FEFC), were around 92% for students paying fees in full. For part-time students doing basic education or ESOL courses retention rates dropped to around 88% and for part-time students in receipt of benefit, they dropped to around 81% (FEFC, 1997a).

The student survey sheds some more light on this issue. Among the 6,548 respondents for whom we have this information, 5,576 (85.2%) were paying no or a reduced fee. They account for 1,178 (90.4%) of the 1,303 students who withdrew early.

This tendency is more marked among evening-only and part-time non-release students. For the former, students who paid no or a reduced rate fee comprised 419 (52.1%) of the 804 students in this category, but 86 (58.1%)

of withdrawn students in this category. The difference is even more marked for part-time, non-release students where students paid no or a reduced fee. Students in this category comprised:

- 638 (78.5%) of 813 students but
- 97 (90.8%) of 217 withdrawn students.

The general implication seems to be that **the relationship between completion and drop-out on the one hand and payment of fees on the other requires detailed research in individual colleges**. The relationship may be important, particularly in respect of part-time, non-released students but it requires local research because of the differences between individual colleges. Where the student survey is sufficiently large to enable conclusions to be drawn at the institutional level, fee remission seems to have been significant in some but not in other colleges.

Given the very large numbers of FE students who pay no or a reduced fee, it is at least arguable that the question is wrongly put. Perhaps we should be exploring the relationship between retention and fees by course rather than by student. It is at least plausible that certain types of course – for example career and professional development courses aimed primarily at people in employment – will recruit mainly fee-paying students with a high commitment to complete and with relatively well-developed learning skills. It is certainly true that part-time released courses (where virtually all students will have their fees paid), have relatively low drop-out rates.

Travel times

There is a widely believed and commonsense view that the length of time needed to travel to college, the complexity of the journey and/or the (in)frequency of public transport strongly affect completion rates (Responsive College Unit, 1995). Drawing on a broad sample of colleges, the present research suggests that the picture is rather more complicated. Broadly, **students with the shortest and longest travel times are slightly more likely to be over-represented among students who drop out**. Students in the intermediate category are likely to be under-represented among those who drop out.

Figure 6 shows the aggregate data for travel time to college by current and withdrawn students.

Figure 6 Travel time to college by current v. withdrawn respondents

Students	Travel time each way			
	Under 30 mins	30-60 mins	More than 1 hour	Total
● Current/completed students				
Number	3239	2139	409	5787
% within student status now	56	37	7.1	100
% of total	44.7	29.5	5.6	79.9
● Withdrawn students				
Number	823	505	128	1456
% within student status now	56.5	34.7	8.8	100
%of total	11.4	7.0	1.8	20.1
● Total students				
Number	4062	2644	537	7243
% of total	56.1	36.5	7.4	100

Several points emerge. First, students are spending quite a long time travelling to and from college. The majority of the colleges in this survey (60%) could be described as urban colleges. Well over 40% of their students are spending an hour or more travelling to and from college and over 7% are spending two or more hours travelling. Secondly, students with the longest travel times are, indeed, over-represented among students who leave early. Third, however, the aggregate data does not suggest that the relationship is particularly strong. This conclusion is reinforced by looking at data at the individual college level.

In over one-fifth of the project colleges, withdrawn students were over-represented among those with journeys under 30 minutes, and in almost as many colleges, under-represented among students with journey times of 30-to-60 minutes. **Again, the message appears to be that variations between colleges are more significant than variations at a national level.**

English as a second language

We wanted to test the proposition that students whose first language was not English might be or might feel disadvantaged and hence be more likely to withdraw. Just over 7,000 students indicated whether English was their first language (this question was not put to students in Welsh colleges).

Of these, 1,431 respondents (20.2% of the total) had withdrawn, but only 102 (1.4% of the total) spoke English as a second language. Indeed, although the proportions varied somewhat from college to college, this was a remarkably consistent finding: **college students for whom English was a second language were under-represented among withdrawn students.**

The implication may be that colleges are succeeding in making provision for such students who may, in any case, be particularly highly motivated first or second generation immigrants. There may be one qualification. Withdrawn students whose first language is not English may be under-represented among survey respondents. This is impossible to verify without separate research. Anecdotal evidence concerning, for example, refugee students suggests that this may be the case.

Student expectations

It has been argued very plausibly that students with high initial expectations will leave early if these are disappointed. Conversely, the view that students with low initial expectations may be among the first to leave is also quite common.

The survey suggests that **attractive though they may be, broad generalisations are not particularly helpful** and the issue needs to be researched by individual colleges. Students were asked to state their opinion of college before they started their course, using a five-point scale from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good) with 3 as the mid point. In aggregate, there was little to distinguish the scores given by current and withdrawn students: 3.63 and 3.78, respectively but there were substantial variations between colleges.

Two Midlands colleges of similar size and situation illustrate the issue perfectly. In one case withdrawn students had a significantly higher opinion than current students (a point score of 4.39 compared to 3.64 from current students). In the other, the scores were lower and those of current students higher than those of withdrawn students (3.18 compared with 2.86).

In view of the significance of the issue of the age of respondents (see pp53-59), a further comment is required concerning the expectations of students, by age. Figure 7 shows the mean scores by age and by current and withdrawn status. The differences are not large and must be treated as persuasive rather than conclusive. They suggest, however, that the **youngest students had the lowest initial opinion of college**. Further, discounting the respondents aged over 55 (because of the small size of the sample), withdrawn students aged 35-55 seem to have been most disappointed in their experience of college. For these students the gap between their initial expectations (a rating of 3.85) and the expectations of current students in the same age group (3.51) was largest.

Figure 7 Student prior opinion of college, by age and by student status

Age group	Current students		Withdrawn students	
	Number	Mean score*	Number	Mean score*
16–18	3109	3.7	780	3.81
19–24	795	3.53	226	3.72
25–34	684	3.57	207	3.66
35–55	543	3.51	136	3.85
Over 55	43	3.49	11	4.55

* Calculated from responses on a five-point score from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good).

Student perceptions of college

A substantial amount of effort in the survey was devoted to student views and perceptions. On the basis of earlier research by FEDA and York College of Further and Higher Education (Martinez, 1995 and 1997b; Kenwright, 1997), we expected some quite marked differences between the views expressed by current and withdrawn students.

Respondents were asked three sorts of questions:

- the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about their experience of college
- the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about their personal circumstances
- what they had liked most and liked least about their course.

The questions were organised in four main groups:

- help in settling into college
- on-programme: issues likely to affect all students
- on-programme: issues likely to affect only some students
- open-ended questions about likes and dislikes.

To avoid bias, the questions in the survey were phrased either negatively or positively.

In analysing the aggregate data here, we applied a 95% probability test, i.e. we are 95% confident that any differences between current and withdrawn students in the sample will be reproduced within the target student population of the 31 colleges. Compared with some previous FEDA research, (Martinez, 1995, 1997b) many more of the relationships reviewed here satisfy this 95% probability test because the sample is larger. In this sense, the survey outcomes can be said to be more reliable and more representative than those reported previously.

Survey data – reality or perception?

Evaluative data derived from student surveys presents a number of problems of interpretation. To put three questions quite bluntly:

- How do we know whether students are telling the truth?
- Are reported views biased? In other words, do less positive evaluations made by withdrawn students reflect disgruntlement caused by the failure – for whatever reason – to complete a course?
- Alternatively, are the evaluations largely subjective? Do apparent differences between current and withdrawn students simply reflect variations in personal attitude, approach, learning style or taste?

We believe that the evaluative data reflects student experiences and can underpin local analyses of persistence and drop-out. It should go without saying that it needs to be interpreted and utilised with appropriate care and caution.

We are fortified in this view by six main sorts of evidence:

- internal corroboration: in the main, student evaluations tend to be corroborated and amplified by their response to open questions ('likes' and 'dislikes')
- discrimination in students' response: around 7,200 (of 7,500) students responded to each of these evaluative questions in the general survey; where they were asked about issues that did not necessarily apply to them, the number of responses varied from 4,200 (on computing facilities) to 1,700 (on childcare places)
- patterns of evaluation: these tend to be quite different between colleges; while withdrawn students are generally less well satisfied than current students, the most significant points of difference between current and withdrawn students seem to reflect local circumstances
- coherence of response: in the main, student responses are coherent; students with short travel times do not, for example, give low evaluations of the convenience of the college location; students who experienced the greatest financial hardship, on the other hand, tend to be more critical of the provision of advice and assistance by their college

- differentiation of response: student evaluations tend to be different on courses with high retention rates from courses with intermediate and low retention rates
- external corroboration: student evaluations tend to be confirmed by qualitative research with students and by relevant quantitative data.

The evaluations presented here comprise the aggregate views of all students in the survey. There were quite substantial differences in response between colleges. This degree of variation is illustrated by the two colleges discussed in Appendix 2.

Help in settling into college

Figure 8 shows the views of respondents on the help they received in settling into college. Withdrawn and current students diverged in their evaluations in five significant ways. Withdrawn students were less likely than current students to agree that:

- it was easy to make friends quickly with other students on their course
- their tutor helped them settle in very quickly
- they knew what the course involved.

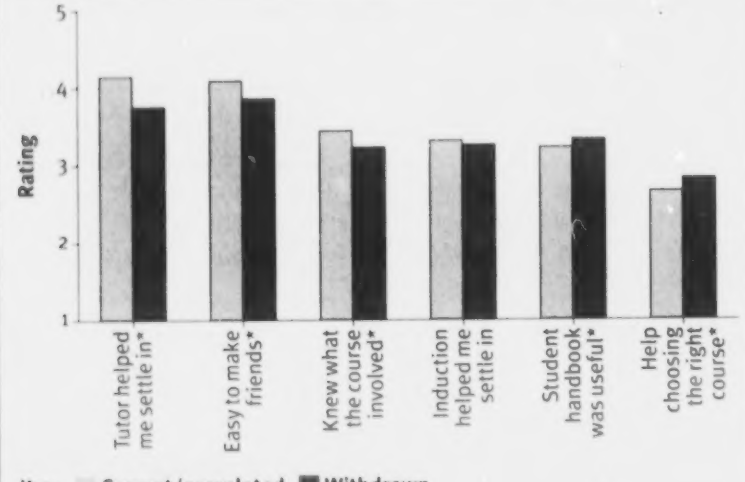
Withdrawn students were slightly more likely than current students to agree that:

- their college had helped them choose the right course
- the student handbook was useful.

Although the majority of respondents evidently appreciated the help they received from their tutors, it was the lesser satisfaction among the minority, which most sharply distinguished withdrawn from current students.

The other really striking feature of this part of the survey was the evaluation by both current and withdrawn students of the help from their college in choosing the course 'which was best for me'. Both groups indicated that, overall, they could not agree with this statement.

Figure 8 Help in starting the course



Key: Current/completed ■ Withdrawn

* indicates significant difference at 95% level of confidence

On-programme: issues affecting all students

We asked students to give us their views on 23 aspects of being a student including a mixture of programme-related and personal issues. The responses are shown at Figure 9. To simplify the presentation of survey outcomes, we have reversed out those questions which were phrased negatively in the questionnaire and this is reflected in the graphs and the discussion which follow.

This survey provides support for the view that the personal circumstances of students are not, on their own, good predictors of drop-out. They also suggest that the student experiences of college are highly significant.

In terms of personal circumstances, students were asked to agree or disagree that:

- they had not experienced financial hardship (question 3)
- their family circumstances did not change during the course (question 6)
- they had not experienced health or personal problems (question 7)
- it was easy to make enough time to study (question 15).

While the survey provides evidence of students being affected by stress and studying in difficult circumstances, these seemed to affect students who stayed on as much as students who withdrew. Thus, withdrawn and current students indicate a similar level of agreement to the questions about financial hardship, and only a slight difference in response to the question about health and personal problems.

Somewhat paradoxically, withdrawn students were more likely than current students to agree that it was easy to make time to study. Three observations may be pertinent here. **It is clear that time management and conflicting demands on their time were issues for all students.** Overall, students gave one of the lowest ratings to this aspect of their experience of college. Moreover, **some withdrawn students may have had unrealistically low expectations of the amount of work required for their programme of study. Thirdly, where drop-out occurred early on, it may well be that withdrawn students had not formed a realistic view of the time required for their studies.**

Rating
1
2
3
4
5
I was allowed to take the course I wanted*
The college treated me as an equal*
I got on well with my teachers*
I got on with other students*
The course was the right one for me*
My family circumstances had not changed during the course*
I would encourage someone else to do my course*
My course was interesting*
The course was not too difficult for me*
I was satisfied with the quality of teaching*
I had no health or personal problems during the course*
The timing of my course was convenient*
I felt safe and secure in college*
Teachers were always prepared for lessons*
The college was convenient to get to
I got enough feedback on my assignments*
I got enough help with my coursework
College social life was good*
College facilities were good*
There was the right amount of coursework
I have not experienced financial hardship during the course*
I found it easy to make enough time to study*
I received enough financial help and guidance from college*
Key: Current/completed Withdrawn
* indicates significant difference at 95% level of confidence

Figure 9 Evaluation of college experience

In one respect, however, personal circumstances differentiated current from withdrawn students quite strongly. Withdrawn students were significantly less likely to agree that their family circumstances had remained the same.

Three questions addressed issues of guidance and choice, namely whether:

- the course was the right one (question 1)
- the course was the right level of difficulty (question 2)
- the student had been allowed to take the course s/he wanted (question 4).

Withdrawn and current students differed significantly in their responses and, indeed, **the sharpest differentiation occurred in relation to being on the right course**. On a 5-point scale where 3 is the mid point, the average level of agreement recorded by current students was 4.20 where for withdrawn students it was 3.03. In addition, while both current and withdrawn students generally agreed that they had been allowed to take the course they wanted, withdrawn students were less positive than current.

Issues around college ethos and social life were explored in four questions which asked students to say whether they agreed that:

- college social life was good (question 12)
- they got on well with other students (question 14)
- they felt safe and secure in college (question 16)
- their college had treated them as equals (question 17).

Students were overwhelmingly positive about being treated as equals and getting on well with other students. They were slightly less positive about feeling 'safe and secure' and less positive again about college social life. The responses of withdrawn students differed from current students in that they were:

- less positive in agreeing that their college treated them as equals (question 17)
- less strong in their agreement that they got on well with other students (question 14)
- slightly more likely to agree that they had felt 'safe and secure' (question 16).

Since previous research (Martinez 1995 and 1997b) has tended to emphasise the importance of student-teacher relationships and interactions, particular attention was paid to this in the survey. Six questions were asked about student perceptions of teaching and learning:

- satisfaction with the quality of teaching (question 5)
- whether their course was interesting (question 8)
- whether they got on well with teachers (question 11)
- whether they got enough help with course work (question 13)
- whether teachers were always prepared for lessons (question 22)
- whether they got enough feedback on assignments (question 23).

In general terms, student views of teaching and learning were favourable. Overall, combining current and withdrawn respondents, students agreed quite strongly with positively phrased questions and disagreed with negatively phrased questions. They were satisfied with the quality of their teaching, got on well with teachers, received enough help with coursework and agreed that teachers were prepared for lessons. Their courses were interesting and feedback on assignments was sufficient. On the other hand, **evaluations of the intrinsic interest of courses strongly distinguished current from withdrawn students. Withdrawn students were also less likely than current students to agree that the quality of teaching was good and that they got on well with their teachers.** There was virtually nothing to distinguish the views of current and withdrawn students in terms of their (generally positive) evaluations of help with coursework, teachers being well prepared and receiving sufficient feedback on assignments.

Two further questions probed issues of timetabling and coursework. Students were asked whether they agreed that:

- the timing of their course was convenient (question 10)
- they had the right amount of course work (question 18).

Current and withdrawn students agreed to an equal degree about volumes of coursework – although neither group was very positive. **Current students agreed quite strongly that the timing of their course was convenient while withdrawn students were much less likely to agree.**

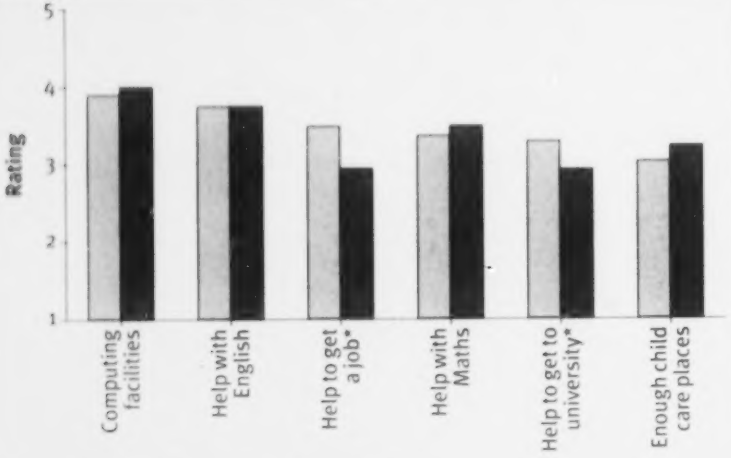
Two questions explored issues of location and college facilities:

- the college was convenient to get to (question 21)
- college facilities were good (question 20).

Current and withdrawn students agreed, although not very strongly, that the college was conveniently located. This tends to confirm the discussion about travel times. The issue seems to be more significant within individual colleges and does not, on its own, seem to lead to significant drop-out across this large sample. A similar observation can be made concerning college facilities. Both current and withdrawn students agreed that they were good, but withdrawn students were actually more positive than current students in their agreement. This may reflect the fact that withdrawn students have less time to become dissatisfied with college facilities.

Students were asked, finally, whether they would recommend someone else to do their course. Current students agreed very strongly that they would; withdrawn students agreed, but much less strongly. Student evaluation of these aspects of college are shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10 Features of studying



Key: Current/completed **Withdrawn**

* indicates significant difference at 95% level of confidence

On-programme: issues affecting some students only

Students were asked about a number of issues which could be important but would not necessarily apply to everyone. Thus, they were asked to agree whether:

- help to get to university was good
- help to get a job was good
- the college provided enough childcare places
- help with maths difficulties was good
- computing facilities were adequate
- help with English/communications difficulties was good.

In line with the response to the general question about college facilities, there is very little to distinguish the evaluations of current and withdrawn students in terms of communications, maths, computing and childcare. Computer facilities and help with English were rated equally and highly. Help with maths was rated equally by both groups, but less favourably.

Withdrawn students were slightly more likely than current students to agree that there were sufficient childcare places but agreement was only just above the mid-point on the 5-point scale.

What differentiated the two groups quite strongly were the questions on help to progress. **Withdrawn students actually disagreed that they had had sufficient help either to get to university or to get a job. Current students were more satisfied, particularly concerning help to get a job.**

Student perceptions of college: summary

There were some substantial differences between current and withdrawn students in their evaluation of a number of aspects of their experience of college.

The biggest gaps were connected with the following factors, in descending order of magnitude:

- being on the right course
- help to get a job
- timetabling of courses

- intrinsic interest of courses
- being treated as an equal
- being allowed to take first choice of course
- help to get to university.

In contrast, the evaluations of completing and non-completing students were virtually identical for:

- college social life
- help with course work
- college conveniently located
- teachers' preparation for lessons.

In three areas, withdrawn students gave more favourable evaluations than completing students:

- college facilities (marked difference)
- feeling safe and secure (slight difference)
- amount of course work (very slight difference).

Completing and non-completing students are not strongly differentiated by reference to their personal circumstances: completing and non-completing students indicate that they are similar in respect of their experience of personal hardship and their experience of health and/or personal problems, although changes in family circumstances are reported more strongly by withdrawn students.

A similar picture emerges if we focus on the strengths of the evaluations made by current and withdrawn students (rather than the degree of difference).

If we take scores of 4 and above as being particularly positive, current students agree strongly that:

- they are on the right course
- the course is not too difficult
- they were allowed to take the course they wanted
- the course is interesting
- they get on well with teachers and other students
- they are treated as equals.

Withdrawn students, by contrast, are much less satisfied. They agree strongly only that they:

- were allowed to take the course they wanted
- got on well with other students
- were treated as equals.

The aspects of college to which withdrawn students gave the lowest satisfaction ratings **and** which differentiate them most strongly from current students are:

- being on the right course
- finding the course interesting
- convenient timing for the course.

The poorest evaluations of aspects of college made equally by both groups included:

- the (lack of) provision of financial help and advice
- the (in)sufficiency of childcare places.

In addition, withdrawn students do not agree that help offered to get to university or get a job was good.

In terms of personal circumstances, finally, current and withdrawn students agreed fairly strongly that their family circumstances were unchanged and that they had not experienced health or personal problems. Withdrawn students agreed (but very weakly) that they had not experienced financial hardship and that it was easy to make time to study. Current students, however, actually disagreed (although weakly) with these statements about financial hardship and making time to study.

Student 'likes' and 'dislikes'

The survey invited students to use two free text boxes to say what they liked most and liked least about college. This data provided additional evidence to inform the consultancy reports for the participating colleges. In the comments below, the laborious task of coding student responses has been undertaken systematically for students from six colleges.

Broadly speaking, what students said they liked most follows the pattern of the evaluative data. Thus, **relationships with other students (mentioned 406 times) and relationships with staff (mentioned 326 times) were by far and away the most popular aspects of college.**

These were followed by a further group of issues which pertained either to the ethos or culture or 'feel' of the college or to social and learning environments:

- social environments (194)
- learning environment (178)
- being treated like an adult (118)
- independence (113)
- general aspects of their courses (111).

Most of the elements in the next group of 'likes' had to do with the physical environment, location, facilities or timetabling:

- location (92)
- timetabling (88)
- work experience (65)
- access to computers (46)
- canteen (45)
- sports/social facilities (42).

What students said that they liked least were, by some considerable margin:

- timetabling (167 mentions)
- social environment (162 mentions).

The combined group of current and withdrawn students identified a second group of 'dislikes' which related partly to issues of teaching and learning:

- learning environment (121)
- relationships with staff (117)
- travel (117)
- volume of work (111).

The third group of most frequently mentioned dislikes included:

- sports/social facilities (87)
- canteen (78)
- location (63)
- parking (59)
- general facilities (54)
- relationships with other students (53)
- quality of teaching (51)
- quality of lessons (49).

This qualitative data from the combined group of current and withdrawn students thus reflects and reinforces the evaluative data. **Students placed particular emphasis on relationships with each other and with their teachers and are generally very positive in their views.** Indeed, they are more positive than negative about their experience of college and especially value certain cultural characteristics of learning: 'independence' and 'being treated as an adult'.

Among the smaller volume of 'dislikes', they were most likely to identify timetabling and social environment. There was, however, quite a sizeable minority of students who mentioned issues to do with teaching and learning including relationships with staff, volume of work, relationships with other students, quality of teaching and quality of lessons.

Relationships with staff featured three times more frequently among 'likes' than 'dislikes'. By the same token, however, relationships with staff appeared among 'dislikes' twice as frequently as relationships with other students.

By contrast, the quality of lessons and the quality of teaching were spontaneously identified relatively infrequently among 'likes' and were mentioned almost as frequently among dislikes.

Student evaluations by age

With such a large sample, it is possible to explore systematically whether there are differences in evaluations by age. Our findings tend to reinforce the conclusions of FEDA's work for individual colleges on analysing the outcomes of student perceptions. Respondents were placed in five age bands: 16-18, 19-24, 25-34, 35-55 and over 55.

Because of the small number (64) in the oldest category, it was eliminated from this part of the analysis. Also, the evaluations by each age group are the average scores of the combined current and withdrawn students. Somewhat to our surprise, the main conclusion that flowed from this analysis was that the youngest age category (16-18 year olds) was, in general, much less satisfied with their experience of college than the older age groups.

Continuing to apply the 95% test for statistical significance, the younger students (16-18) were less likely to agree that:

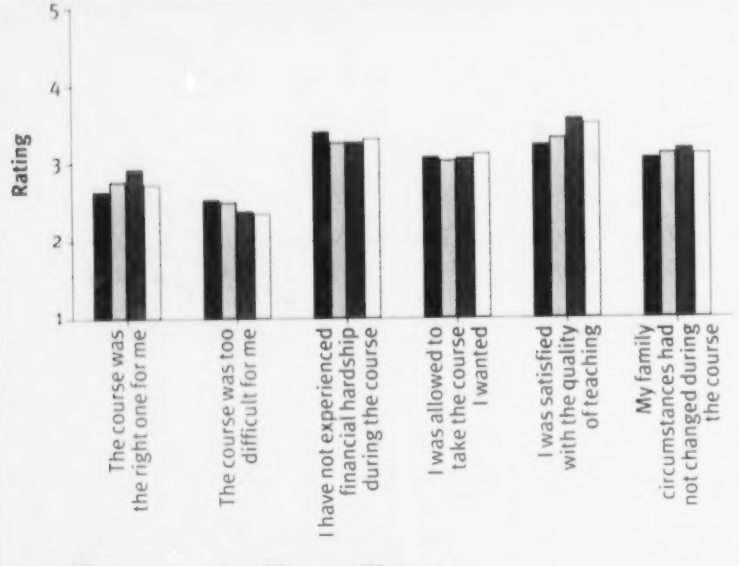
- the college helped me choose the course which was best for me
- the student handbook was useful
- my tutor helped me settle in very quickly.

See Figure 11 for evaluations of issues around starting courses, by age.

Age differences are, if anything, more marked in responses to questions about studying at college: 16-18 year olds were significantly less likely than older students to agree that:

- they were on the right course (question 1)
- they were satisfied with the quality of teaching (question 5)
- their course was interesting (question 8)
- they got on well with their teachers (question 11)
- they received enough help with course work (question 13)
- they felt safe and secure in college (question 16)
- the amount of course work was right (question 18)
- teachers were always prepared for lessons (question 22)
- they received enough feedback on assignments (question 23).

Figure 11 Starting your course – age profile of respondents


Rating
5
4
3
2
1
The course was the right one for me
The course was too difficult for me
I have not experienced financial hardship during the course
I was allowed to take the course I wanted
I was satisfied with the quality of teaching
My family circumstances had not changed during the course
Key: 16–18 19–24 25–34 35–55

The two aspects of college that younger students rated more highly than older were the timing of courses (question 10) and college social life (question 12). This analysis is shown in full in Figures 12a and 12b.

On the issues affecting some students only, the younger students were less likely than older students to agree that:

- help to get to university was good
- help with maths difficulties was good
- help with English/communications difficulties was good.

Older students, on the other hand, were less likely than younger students to agree that the college provides enough childcare places. See Figure 13.

The picture was more complex in relation to the personal circumstances of students.

Figures 12a and 12b show that:

- students aged 35-55 were most likely to agree that they experienced financial hardship; students aged 19-24 were least likely to agree (question 3)
- students aged 16-18 were most likely to agree that their family circumstances had changed; students aged 25-35 were least inclined to agree (question 6)
- students aged 16-18 agreed most strongly that they had experienced health or personal problems; students aged 35-55 agreed least strongly (question 7)
- students from different groups agreed more or less equally that it was easy to make time to study (question 15)
- students aged 35-55 were most satisfied with the financial help and advice they had received; students aged 19-24 were least satisfied (question 9).

This is the first time such age differentials have shown up so sharply in published research. The patterns suggest two main inferences.

Figure 12a Studying at college – age profile of respondents (1 of 2)

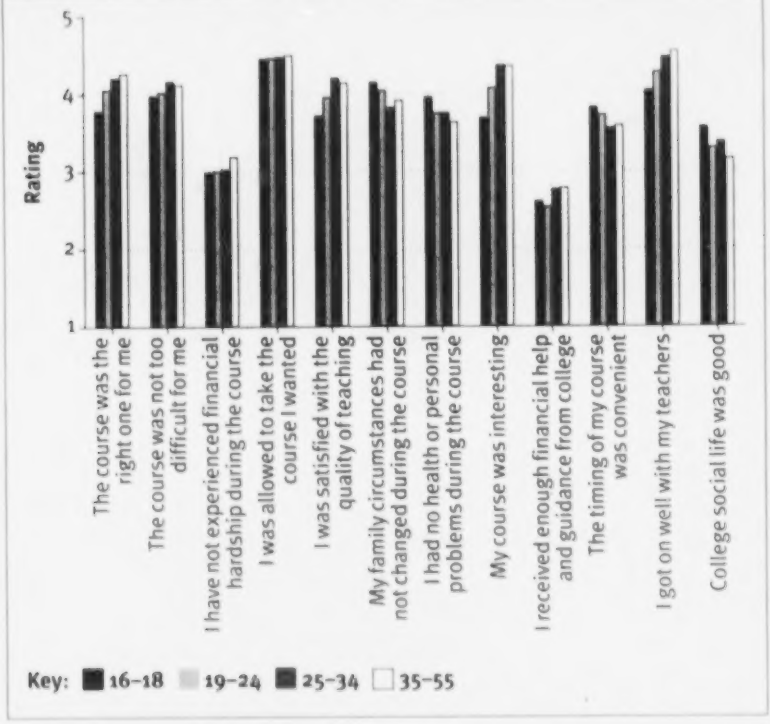
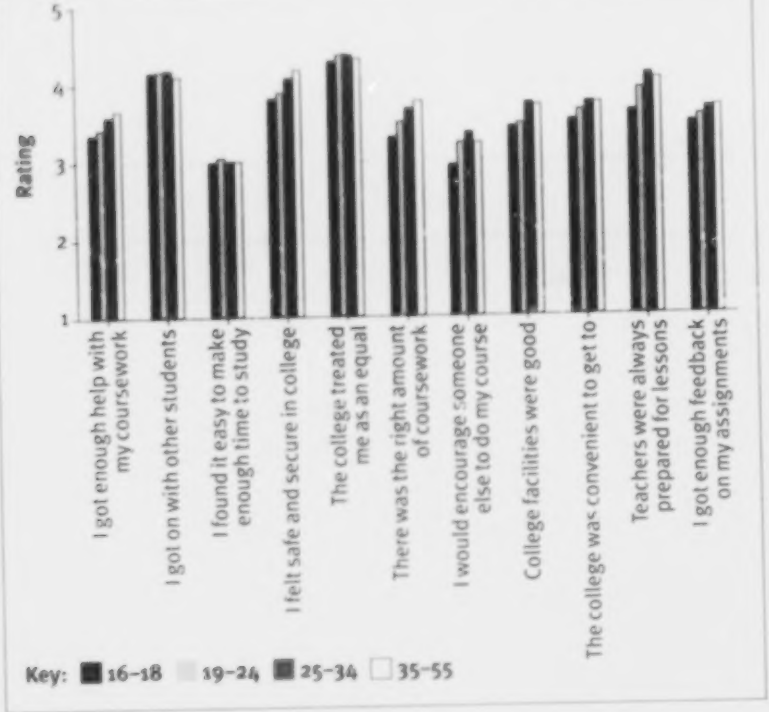

Rating
5
4
3
2
1
The course was the right one for me
The course was not too difficult for me
I have not experienced financial hardship during the course
I was allowed to take the course I wanted
I was satisfied with the quality of teaching
My family circumstances had not changed during the course
I had no health or personal problems during the course
My course was interesting
I received enough financial help and guidance from college
The timing of my course was convenient
I got on well with my teachers
College social life was good
Key: 16–18 19–24 25–34 35–55

Figure 12b Studying at college – age profile of respondents (2 of 2)


Rating
5
4
3
2
1
I got enough help with my coursework
I got on with other students
I found it easy to make enough time to study
I felt safe and secure in college
The college treated me as an equal
There was the right amount of coursework
I would encourage someone else to do my course
College facilities were good
The college was convenient to get to
Teachers were always prepared for lessons
I got enough feedback on my assignments
Key: 16–18 19–24 25–34 35–55

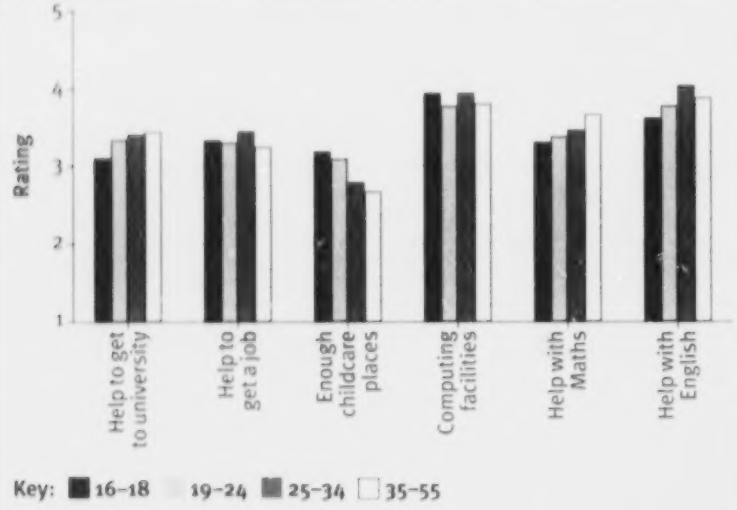
First and above all, younger students are less satisfied than their older peers with significant aspects of their college experience. This is probably related to the much lower participation rates in further education by older students.

Only 10% of adults aged 19 or above participate in formal education of any sorts each year. They tend to be people who are already quite well qualified and have greater experience of education after compulsory schooling (Steedman and Green, 1996; FEFC, 1997c; NIACE, 1996). Among this quite selective group, therefore, we may infer that there is a substantial number of students who are relatively successful learners and, above all, whose expectations of study have been fulfilled in the past. **On this analysis, these findings do not support the interpretation that colleges have become particularly skillful at making provision for older students. Rather it suggests that older students know what to expect and are largely satisfied when they get it.**

Participation rates in full- and part-time education and training among 16, 17 and 18-year-olds are, by contrast, 86.4%, 78.7% and 59.7% respectively (DfEE, 1997a). We know, moreover, that **many young students going to college have not been particularly successful at school** (Payne, 1995a) **and, that even among students who have been successful, the transition from GCSE to advanced level can be difficult** (Martinez, 1996). It is presumably this which accounts for the lower levels of satisfaction recorded by younger students in this survey.

Further points of note are the variations in personal circumstances. Younger students are more likely to experience health and personal problems and changes in family circumstances. Older students by contrast are more likely to report financial problems and find timetabling issues difficult.

Figure 13 Features of studying – age profile of respondents



Courses with different retention rates

Anecdotal evidence from this project and substantial qualitative and quantitative evidence from parallel FEDA research on GNVQs (Davies, 1998), demonstrate quite unequivocally that factors affecting persistence and drop-out may vary in different types of qualification, programme area, mode of attendance, etc. Issues around the scheduling of coursework, portfolio construction and the volume of assessment within the GNVQ curriculum, for example, are too well known to require discussion here.

A new issue we wanted to explore within this large survey was differential drop-out and persistence at course level. Specifically, we wanted to use the large survey to explore whether there were factors which could differentiate courses with high and low retention rates, across subject areas. To this end, participating colleges were asked to allocate a code to each course followed by the student included in the survey:

- high retention rate courses (90% or more students complete)
- intermediate retention rate courses (70-89%)
- low retention rate courses (less than 70%)
- courses where the retention rate is not known.

We suggested the norms, but colleges could vary them by reference to norms within the group of courses which formed the basis for their research.

The outcomes need to be treated with some caution for two reasons: first, because the norms varied somewhat between colleges; secondly, because there are relatively large numbers of 'missing cases' (over 12% of the sample). These are respondents for whom we do not have the relevant data.

Having stated these qualifications, the most significant generalisation is that the evaluative scores recorded by respondents on different types of course are somewhat different but not always in the sense we anticipated!

Comparing the different categories of course, high retention rate courses were characterised mainly by:

- a significantly lower agreement score among withdrawn students that they knew what the course involved
- a high agreement score among current students that their tutors had helped them settle in and a correspondingly low score among withdrawn students
- the highest agreement score for current students that they were on the right course and the lowest agreement score for withdrawn students for the same issue (actually below the mid-point on the scale)
- the highest level of agreement among current students that they had been allowed to take the course they wanted
- the highest agreement score among current students that the timing of their course was convenient and the lowest score for withdrawn students for the same
- the lowest agreement score (below the mid-point) among current students that it was easy to make time to study and the highest score for withdrawn students for the same issue
- the lowest evaluation by current students of college facilities
- the lowest evaluation by withdrawn students for the convenience of the location of the college.

Bar charts showing the evaluation of college by withdrawn and current students on courses with high, low and intermediate retention rates are set out in Figures 14 to 19.

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Figure 14 Help in starting the course, by course retention

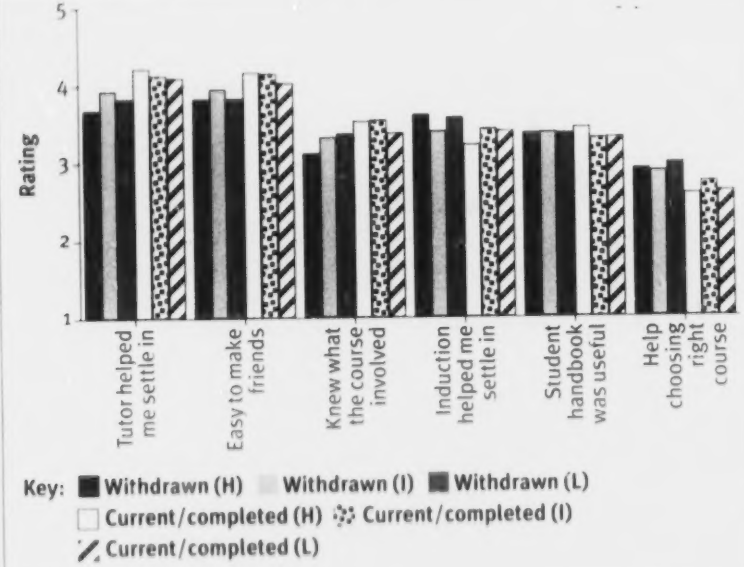


Figure 15 Evaluation of college experience, by course retention

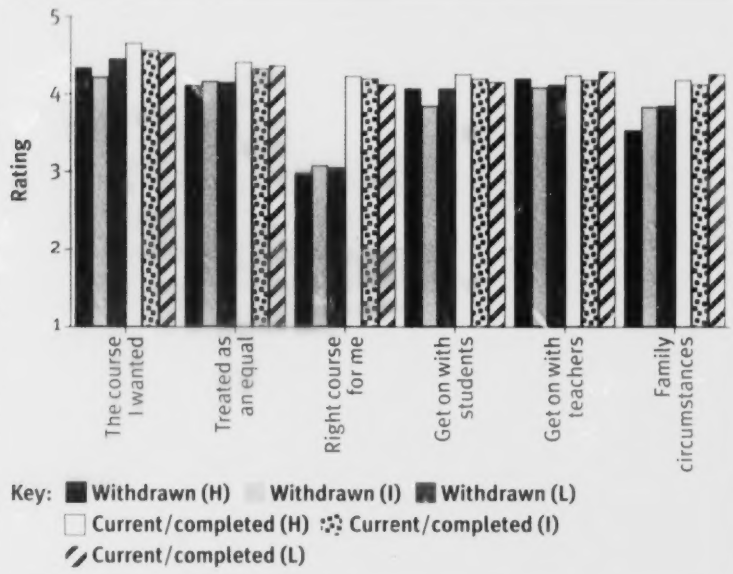


Figure 16 Evaluation of college experience, by course retention

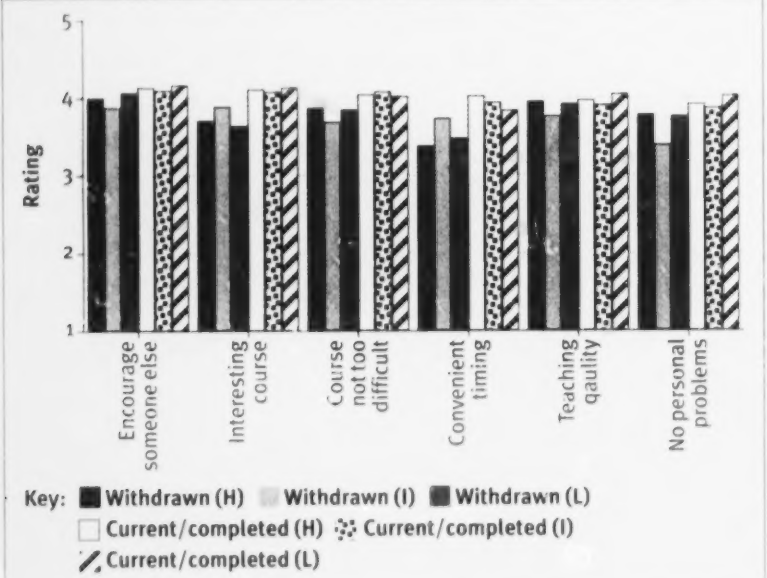


Figure 17 Evaluation of college experience, by course retention

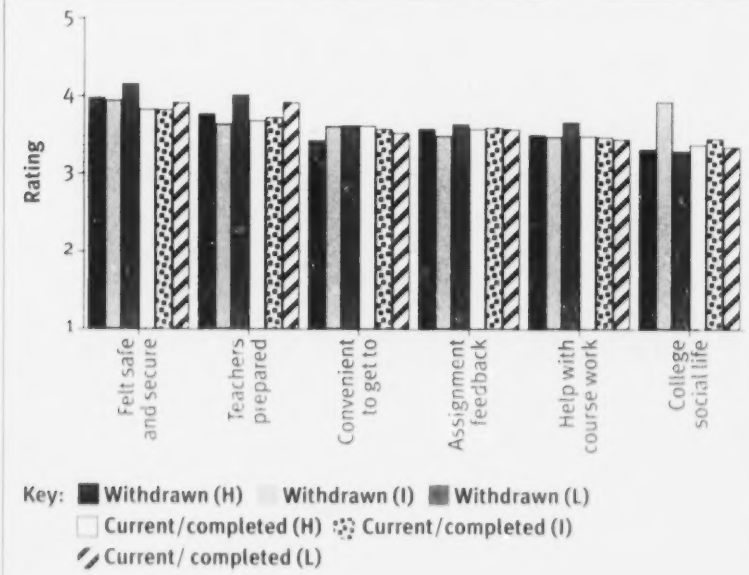


Figure 18 Evaluation of college experience, by course retention

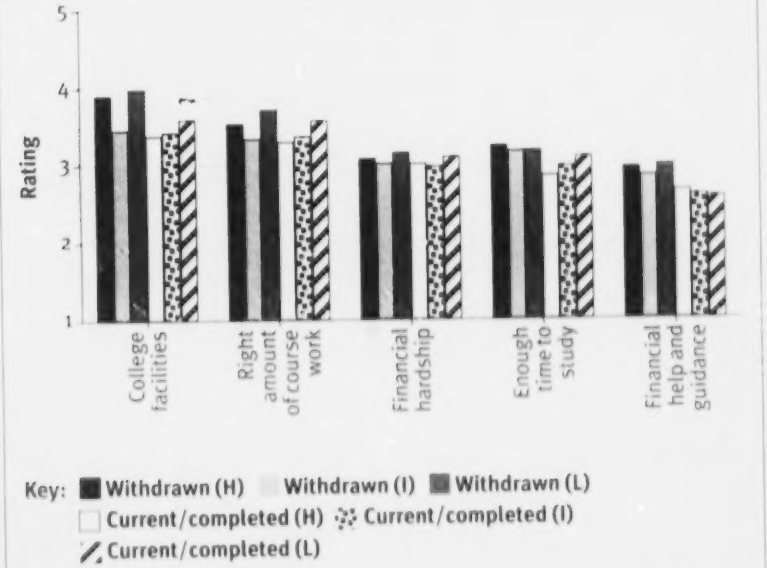
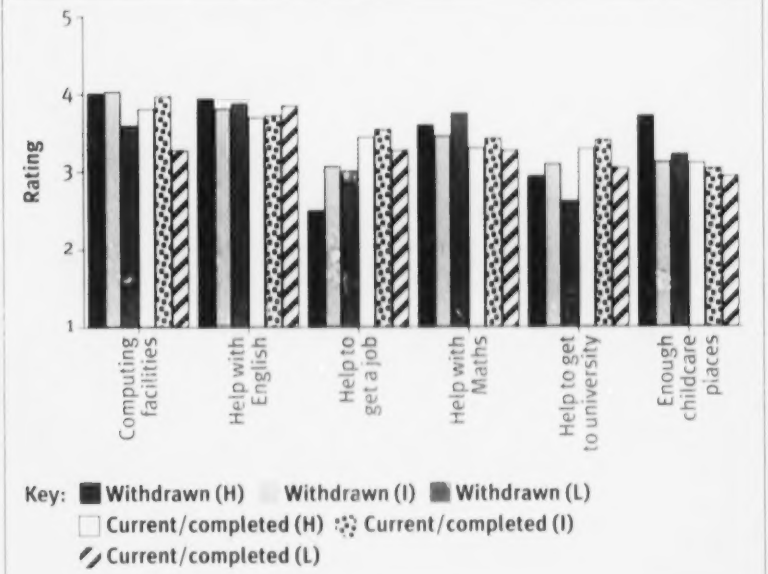


Figure 19 Features of studying, by course retention



Intermediate retention rate courses differed from the others mainly in that:

- withdrawn students gave the lowest agreement score to being allowed to take up the course they wanted
- withdrawn students were least likely to agree that they were satisfied with the quality of teaching
- withdrawn students gave the lowest agreement score to 'getting on well with teachers'
- similarly, they gave the lowest score to receiving enough help with coursework
- the same withdrawn students also gave the lowest scores to teacher preparation
- withdrawn students were least likely to agree that they would recommend their course to others.

Courses with low retention rates have been compared with the intermediate. There are relatively few differences. Almost all the most significant relate to withdrawn students who give more favourable evaluations than students who withdraw from intermediate retention rate courses on:

- being allowed to take the course they wanted
- getting on well with teachers
- getting enough help with coursework
- having the right amount of coursework
- teachers being well prepared.

Low retention rate courses were also characterised by the greatest difference between current and withdrawn students in response to the question about health/personal problems. Current students on low retention rate courses agreed most strongly that they experienced health and/or personal problems.

Nowhere are the complexities and sensitivities of the issues around drop-out better illustrated than here. It is, first, easier to say what is not being demonstrated. **There is clearly no straightforward relationship between the evaluation of college experiences most intimately associated with teaching and learning and retention rates for different courses: the evaluation of aspects of teaching and learning is actually lower for courses with intermediate retention rates than for courses with low retention rates.**

We must, however, be cautious. The smaller the unit of analysis, the more likely it is that random variations may create false correlations. To put this in a slightly different way, apparent variations in persistence and drop-out among relatively small numbers of students enrolled on individual courses or programmes need to be investigated and interpreted with even more care than variations between larger numbers at departmental or institutional level.

Having stated this caveat the personal circumstances of students are similarly complex. **There is no apparent concentration of students with personal, health or financial problems in courses with the lowest retention rates.**

What seems to emerge is that in some crucial aspects of their experience, student evaluations are most polarised on high retention rate courses. On the one hand, current students seem to feel most strongly that they are on the right course. On the other hand, students who withdraw from high retention rate courses, seem to feel particularly strongly that their course placement was inappropriate. Students persist in high retention rate courses, moreover, despite poor evaluations of college facilities.

Courses with intermediate retention rates seem to generate the least satisfaction among withdrawn students in a number of areas closely associated with teaching and learning.

This analysis tends to suggest the following conclusions:

- **evaluative data from courses with high, intermediate and low retention rates can provide useful evidence concerning persistence and drop-out but will require careful investigation and interpretation**
- **courses with high retention rates may polarise student opinions between a satisfied majority and a dissatisfied minority**
- **courses with intermediate retention rates were associated with particularly low levels of satisfaction among withdrawn students.**
- **courses with some of the lowest retention rates do not seem to generate greater dissatisfaction (or lower satisfaction) than courses with intermediate retention rates.**

A-level students

Two colleges wanted to focus their research on full-time A-level students. For them the main issue was not student withdrawal from college but rather withdrawal from one or more courses. To research the issue, a different survey instrument was designed. The main differences included an invitation to students to:

- identify all courses they were currently undertaking and any courses they had started but then abandoned
- record 'likes' and 'dislikes' against each course
- agree/disagree with a limited number of propositions for each current course.

The analysis thus produced three categories of respondent:

- 'current students' who were continuing with all the courses which they had started
- 'dropped students' who had dropped one or more of the courses which they had started
- 'withdrawn students' who had dropped all of the courses they had started and withdrawn from the college.

One of the two colleges using this methodology surveyed just under half of all enrolled students. The analysis which follows concentrates on this college because of the size of its sample.

The significance of the issue of dropped courses for this college is suggested by the profile of survey: almost 40% of respondents had dropped one or more courses.

Student status	Number	%
Current	390	54.80
Dropped	276	39.00
Withdrawn	17	2.40
Missing	27	3.80
Total	710	100.00

Anecdotal evidence suggests that this sort of pattern is not untypical of large A-level cohorts in sixth form, further education or tertiary colleges. Students who drop courses in this way may not be identified in HEIC performance indicators either because their decision to drop a course or courses is made before the first census date or because they continue as full-time students.

In the college in question, dropped courses included both A-levels and a variety of other courses. Some 170 of the respondents dropped at least one A-level; 62 respondents dropped two courses, at least one of which was an A-level; 32 respondents dropped two A-levels. Overall, 276 respondents dropped 358 courses.

There were few, if any, demographic characteristics to distinguish dropped from current students. Specifically, the groups are very similar in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, time taken to travel to college, the apparent lack of financial hardship and whether (in a few cases) normal entry requirements had been waived.

Students who dropped courses were more likely than current students, however, to agree that they had experienced health and/or personal problems. They were also more likely than current students to agree that it was not convenient to get to college.

Dropped and current respondents expressed similar degrees of agreement about encouraging others to do their course.

Similarly, respondents expressed similar degrees of agreement/disagreement about settling into their courses. Both dropped and current students tended to agree that the college helped them to choose the course that was best for them. Before they started, they knew only a little about what the course involved. They were positive about the effects of the induction programme in helping them to settle in. They did not find it difficult to make friends quickly with other students on their course. They found their student handbook useful. Current students tended to agree more strongly than dropped students that their tutor helped them to settle in quickly but neither group felt very strongly that their tutors had been helpful at this point.

There were, however, some striking differences in the likes and dislikes expressed in relation to current and dropped courses.

For current courses, some common issues appeared in the 'liked most' and 'liked least' responses. Thus, teachers and teaching were either liked or disliked as were course content, the inherent difficulty of a given course and whether a course was interesting or uninteresting. The other features of current courses that were liked most included gaining qualifications, practical work, modular structure, learning and the social aspect of courses. Dislikes included too much work.

A rather different pattern, however, emerges of the courses which were most frequently dropped by students. A detailed analysis was undertaken of the likes and dislikes identified by students who dropped courses in 12 A-level subjects. These subjects represented 40% of the total number of subjects on offer but 60% of dropped places.

Figure 20 below shows what was liked most and least in descending order of frequency. The numbers refer to the number of times each feature was mentioned:

Figure 20 Dropped A-level courses in 12 subjects: features liked most and liked least

Features liked most	Features liked least
● Subject interest: 42 ● Content: 17 ● Practicals: 11 ● The teacher: 5 ● Classroom discussion: 1	● Course too difficult: 28 ● Workload: 24 ● Course boring/uninteresting: 23 ● The teacher:22 ● Course not as expected: 13 ● Course too fast: 6 ● Poor teaching: 3
Total: 76	**Total: 119**

By comparison with students who continued on course, what seems striking about the response by students who had dropped courses are:

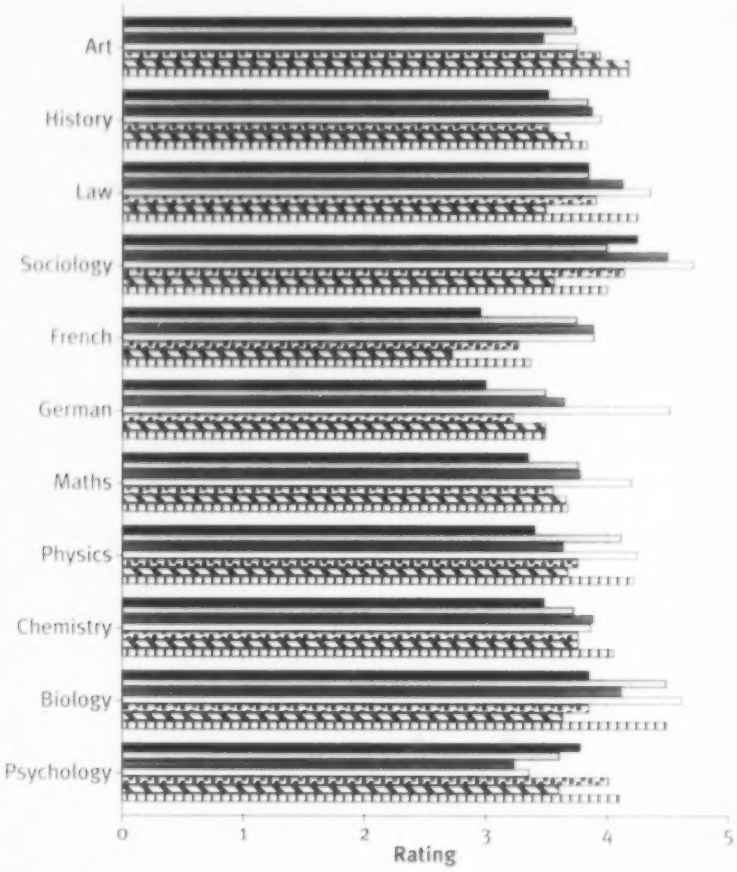
- the greater volume of dislikes
- the high frequency of adverse comments about workload and level of difficulty
- the low frequency of positive comments about teachers and teaching
- the high frequency of expressions of intrinsic interest in the subject on the part of the students
- the high frequency of negative comments about teaching.

Students who persisted in their original course choice were also asked to agree or disagree with a number of statements about each course. For the sake of clarity, questions which were phrased negatively in the survey have been phrased positively here. Students were asked specifically to use a 5 point scale (5 = agree very strongly; 1 = disagree very strongly; 3 = neutral) in respect of the following:

- *I get on well with the teachers*
- *the course is not too difficult for me*
- *lessons are generally interesting*
- *teachers are always well prepared for classes*
- *I get enough feedback on my work*
- *I get the help I need if I have difficulties*
- *I would encourage others to do this course.*

The response for 11 courses is presented in Figure 21 on the next page.

Figure 21 Evaluations of aspects of 11 A-level courses, by current students



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Not surprisingly, the evaluations are generally positive but a number of interesting points emerge:

- there is considerable variation between courses; sociology for example receives the most favourable evaluation and French and German the least
- current students on the least well-rated courses (French and German) are largely neutral about recommending their course to others
- students on the most highly rated (sociology) agree most strongly that they would recommend their course to others
- while some courses are rated consistently across all or most aspects, others are not; in psychology, for example, students agree strongly that they get on with their teachers and that lessons are interesting, but agree much less strongly that teachers are always well prepared or that they receive enough feedback.

The further point that emerges from this analysis is that (once again) interpretation must be done with caution. For these A-level students, in this college, the relationship between qualitative data (student 'likes and dislikes'), numerical evaluations and student behaviours (decisions to persist or withdraw) are not straightforward. To cite just one example, the subject which generates the highest ratio of spontaneous negative comment to positive comment (among students who had already abandoned it) is maths. And yet, the evaluation by current students (Figure 21) for the same subject would be characterised as 'satisfactory or better' rather than 'poor'.

The size of the sample was much smaller in the second college where this approach was adopted. The impression of likes and dislikes is, however, broadly similar. Figure 22 shows the features that were liked most and liked least in descending order of frequency.

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Figure 22 A-levels: what was liked most and what was liked least by respondents who had dropped one or more A-level courses (N=17) and current respondents (N=24)

Current students	Dropped students
What was liked most about courses	**What was liked most about courses**
● Interesting ● Practicals ● Friendly atmosphere ● Good teachers ● Course content	● Interesting
What was liked least about courses	**What was liked least about courses**
● Too much work ● Content too difficult ● Teaching method	● Workload too great ● Boring ● The teacher ● Difficult ● Poor teaching

A-level students: summary

- For the two colleges in the survey, students who withdrew from one or more courses presented a more significant problem than students who withdrew completely from college.
- Overall evaluations of college and their willingness to recommend the college to others, were not influenced strongly by decisions to withdraw from individual courses.
- A-level students who drop one or more courses are more likely to report health or personal problems than those who do not.
- They are also less likely to agree that the college is conveniently located.
- Students discriminate in their evaluations of individual courses. Students who drop a course tend to be less satisfied and tend to identify more 'dislikes' than students who continue.

Chapter 3

Qualitative evidence: student and staff views

Introduction

Even in a small college or a faculty in a large college, the task of understanding the reasons for persistence or drop-out is daunting. Information derived from MIS sources may be patchy and incomplete. The reasons recorded for student withdrawal are usually quite superficial and gathered using suspect methods (Martinez, 1995). There will be a huge amount of often conflicting and contradictory local knowledge held by tutors, teachers, counsellors, learning support specialists and, of course, students themselves. Even where attempts have been made to contact withdrawn students and students with poor attendance, on the point of dropping out, response rates may be quite low.

In addition to the contradictory problems of too much but incomplete information, we also need to address the issues of bias. These exist at three levels: staff, student and our own.

To state the obvious, teachers accept a high degree of personal exposure in their professional role. It is difficult to take criticisms as criticisms of behaviours (that we can do something about) rather than criticisms of ourselves as people. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that teachers can bring a certain mindset to issues of drop-out. At the risk of oversimplification to the point

of caricature, teachers whose students complete their courses and achieve their qualification goals will tend to attribute this to their own actions. Teachers whose students drop out, will tend to identify largely external reasons to do with the characteristics of their students: lack of motivation, poverty, health, caring commitments, the conflicting demands of part-time work, etc. Alternatively, they may allocate responsibility to others either within or outside the college: unsympathetic managers, lack of resources, poor cross-college systems, local economic factors, competition for able students from other providers, downward pressures on funding and upward pressures on student numbers.

Possible bias in staff views is a widespread phenomenon which is certainly evident from interviews conducted for this (and other) research (Martinez, 1995; Davies, 1998; Kenwright, 1996). There is a less widely recognised possibility of bias in student views which has at least two elements.

First, where withdrawn students are asked to give reasons for their withdrawal using relatively unsophisticated survey methods (a brief phone call, a brief postal questionnaire), they are likely to give a perfunctory response which exaggerates their personal circumstances (personal problems, getting a job, 'I changed my mind') and underplays issues related to their experience of college which might be seen as criticisms of teachers (Martinez, 1995; Kenwright, 1996; Vick, 1997).

Secondly, more speculatively, and thinking about our own experience of withdrawing from courses, this tendency may be exaggerated by our (i.e. the learners') tendency to attribute unsuccessful completion to personal failure and successful completion to help received from teachers.

Current students are more accessible than withdrawn students and for this reason alone will tend to be a major source of information about drop-out and persistence. They may be able to provide direct or indirect evidence concerning:

- the reasons their friends have dropped out
- causes of dissatisfaction which prompted them to consider dropping out themselves
- factors that help them to remain
- reasons they may have withdrawn from earlier courses.

We give considerable prominence in the discussion which follows to the views of current students, but we need to acknowledge two further possible types of bias.

Current students are by definition persisters; they have stuck it out while some of their peers have not. There is a suggestion that this leads to a certain presumption about the personal characteristics of withdrawn students to the effect that they lacked motivation, were not prepared to buckle down and do the necessary work, did not have the stamina or were 'passing their time' at college until another and better opportunity arose.

The converse can also be observed. Because current students have stayed the course, there is some evidence that their analysis of reasons for drop-out may be skewed towards issues which are irritants or difficulties, but which would not lead (and have not led) to withdrawal. In other words, because current students are focused on their current course or programme, this could lead them to exaggerate some criticisms of the college.

Perhaps the most difficult issue concerning bias lies in ourselves. Faced with such a large volume of information, our most pressing task is the selection and weighing of evidence and hence the identification of the 'vital few' from the 'trivial many'. What principles of selection should we choose? How can we guard against any tendency to select evidence which confirms our own prejudices?

We have adopted four methods here:

- compare student and staff views both with each other and with the statistical data
- identify and try to understand any apparent inconsistencies
- generalise from experience across the group of colleges
- compare (and contrast where necessary) the outcomes of the present research with those of other major research studies (for example Davies, 1998; Kenwright, 1996 and 1997; Martinez, 1997a).

Over 200 meetings and focus groups were held at colleges, generating a huge amount of qualitative evidence for very different institutions. The following section provides a synthesis and commentary on key issues which emerged. These are discussed within the following categories:

- pre-entry guidance and admissions
- curriculum design and delivery
- student support
- quality assurance
- management information systems.

In order to bring this discussion alive, many of the points are illustrated by boxes containing comments from students. For the most part such comments are critical. This reflects the purpose of the consultancies which have led to the present report. They were intended to identify the reasons for drop-out and to develop recommendations for action. The student comments may have a value in that they bring the text alive and illustrate the sorts of things that students may be saying in your college. They do not reflect the majority of opinions and sentiments which were overwhelmingly positive and which warmly appreciated the efforts and commitments of teachers, tutors and support staff and the systems, services and procedures developed by college managers.

Pre-entry guidance and admissions

The reasons for withdrawal identified by staff included:

- lack of motivation and commitment
- unrealistic expectations
- parental pressure
- inadequate pre-entry information
- limited taster opportunities
- open access policies and pressure to increase enrolments
- inappropriate selection to courses
- insufficient specialist involvement in admissions
- lack of time and training for initial interviews
- inadequate support from application to enrolment.

Motivation and commitment

Both staff and students identified motivation and commitment as key factors in retention. Poor motivation is a significant problem for GCSE and GNVQ intermediate courses and some students have been poor attenders at school. Adult students tend to be more focused than younger students. Some foundation and intermediate level students come to college because they don't know what else to do and have nowhere else to go. They often leave as soon as they find a job. Students who are clear about their personal goals are more likely to be motivated to achieve them. Clear progression goals are among the main reasons students continue at college and students leave because they are not on the right course or find jobs. Most want a qualification in order to get a job or to progress to higher education. They stay because they think it will improve their future prospects and see little point in leaving in the second year.

According to the views of current students:

> *They (withdrawn students) were filling in time; they didn't know what the course was about before hand.*
>
> *They weren't motivated (they weren't bothered).*
>
> *Half the class left, you could tell they weren't suited.*
>
> *They slowly dropped out; they got fed up; they've got personal reasons*

Both staff and students highlighted the significance of a mismatch between expectations and reality. Teachers quoted students interested in sport recruited to GNVQ Leisure and Tourism courses and students who perceived some A-level subjects were easier than others.

Students were dissatisfied when the information they received was inadequate or misleading, and where opportunities to meet specialist tutors were limited. They wanted information about course timetables, examples of the kind of work they would be expected to do and an opportunity to talk to someone with detailed knowledge of the course. Some felt that what they wanted and their capability to do the course had not been adequately explored in the admissions interview.

> *Course leaflets are too vague.*
>
> *Students leave because they didn't expect the course to be as it was.*
>
> *We weren't told about the real aspects of the course – ways of working, assessments.*
>
> *They told us we had to spend £80 on equipment after we joined the course.*
>
> *Course information doesn't give the real picture Some students are not made to appreciate how demanding the course would be and think that GNVQ is easy.*

Students who are not placed on the course of their first choice are more critical of the admissions process and believe that this leads to drop-out. This is only partly borne out by the survey data. Withdrawn students were indeed less likely to agree that they had been allowed to take the course they

wanted. On the other hand, undertaking a second choice course does not seem to lead to a particularly large rate of drop-out. Most withdrawn students agreed quite strongly that they had been allowed their first choice course (see Figure 9).

Parents have a significant influence on younger students' choice and perceptions of the differential status of A-level and vocational courses can be an important factor in relation to retention. A significant number of the students coming to college as a result of parental pressure are poorly motivated, change their minds and eventually drop out. A decision to resit GCSE is often a negative decision and A-level is not always an appropriate choice.

Pre-entry information

In terms of more positive messages, staff and student views tended to converge in respect of the benefits from open days and tasters and opportunities to speak to existing students. Well developed links with partner schools provide opportunities for pupils to visit the college in Years 9, 10 and 11 and pupils and parents are invited to attend college open evenings during the college year. One college also provides a comprehensive enrolment pack for all prospective students in August: a high proportion of students interviewed and applying to the college arrived in September.

School link provision, taster and introductory programmes enable students to sample a range of courses and increase their understanding of the options available to them. They help to build confidence, to allow students to get used to a college environment and to begin to establish supportive relationships with staff and other students. Some of the colleges were developing joint programmes with schools at foundation and intermediate level and arrange interviews in secondary schools. Some also offer programmes of introductory Saturday activities and short courses for adult returners. Many colleges have a comprehensive range of college literature, course handbooks and leaflets and there are examples of college prospectuses focusing on careers relating to each vocational area.

However, competition between post-16 providers often restricted the opportunity available to receive information, let alone sample courses. Course information is not always realistic, the options offered are not

always available and information can be overwhelming if not clearly explained. If opportunities exist to sample a course for a day they need to be effectively promoted. Students need information which explains progression opportunities and details hidden costs such as field trips and registration fees. Students were particularly critical of course literature which included little information on workload or the requirement to study for additional qualifications.

Admissions procedures

Students on the wrong course are more likely to drop out and appropriate selection to courses by central admissions or specialist staff is of crucial importance to retention. Staff however emphasised the impact of open access policies and financial pressures to recruit:

> *The move to open access programmes has introduced a greater number of students who are academically weak and have behavioural and discipline problems. This group has lower attendance, achievement and retention.*

Selection criteria are sometimes relaxed if recruitment is low and staff recommended more rigorous admissions policies and well-defined entry criteria. Entry criteria for GCSE courses and for students progressing from GNVQ Intermediate to Advanced-level courses may be inappropriate and students enrolling on A-level programmes with four GCSE passes at Grade C often overstretch themselves. There is clearly a tension here. At the other extreme, some staff seem to feel that it was important to 'weed out' uncommitted or unprepared students by emphasising just how hard the course would be.

> *Clearly they don't select students on the basis that they are likely to succeed.*

> *We were told from the beginning it was going to be tough.*

More positive messages, mainly from staff, were that effective pre-entry guidance makes a substantial contribution to retention by ensuring that students are enrolled on courses relevant to their personal and career goals and appropriate to their ability. A range of guidance and specialist interviews

can help students understand the nature and content of the programme and the self-discipline they need to complete it. It allows students to clarify their intended course or programme mix and allows tutors to begin to build a profile of students' personal and career aims. In some colleges, students have an entitlement to an unlimited number of specialist interviews before committing themselves to a course. In one college, students are interviewed by faculty staff and the admissions unit picks up students with more than one choice. In another, there is a designated admissions tutor in each division who links with admissions guidance staff. The admissions tutor is responsible for providing generic vocational guidance and overseeing the consistent application of admissions procedures. The role is clearly defined and well understood by staff.

Effective admissions systems are often backed by detailed staff handbooks and interview checklists. However, some staff wanted more time invested in initial interviews to discuss medium and longer term goals and prepare students for less popular aspects of the course. They also highlighted the importance of selecting staff with well-developed interpersonal skills and the need for appropriate training. Some colleges use untrained staff, others require all interviewing to be done by accredited interviewers and have introduced accredited training in educational guidance to ensure impartiality.

There is often scope to disseminate good practice across institutions. There were examples of course teams introducing double staffing for selection interviews and special aptitude tests as well as clarifying and increasing the emphasis placed on specific entry requirements. A number of staff found it difficult to judge student potential on the basis of information received from schools. In some cases, students lacking minimum entry requirements are placed on diagnostic courses which enable them to demonstrate their academic and practical skills and subsequently progress to the most appropriate course.

Support from application to course commencement

The relatively high withdrawal rates of students between application and enrolment point to a particular need to support and counsel students during this process. Students need to be effectively tracked through the admissions process especially if they are referred to other provision.

A number of colleges recognised the importance of maintaining contact with prospective students between application and enrolment. One was concerned to maintain contact with students on two-year courses to reduce drop-out over the summer break. A few have introduced 'buddy' schemes or run summer programmes to sustain student interest. Buddies are paid or unpaid student volunteers who maintain contact and arrange visits and taster sessions before the start of the course. These focus on practical activities, develop study skills and begin the process of group bonding.

Despite various initiatives supporting the transition to college, some students start courses without fully understanding what is entailed. There is often pressure on admissions staff in September and the availability of initial guidance at this time can be limited, especially for part-time students.

Curriculum design and delivery

Research suggests that there are many interlinked factors associated with course design, management and delivery which directly affect retention. The degree to which particular factors are present varies from course to course and may vary from year to year. Evidence points to the importance of good quality teaching and learning in motivating students and it is frequently the strength of motivation which keeps students on courses when they encounter difficulties with the course or at a more personal level.

Student interviews sometimes highlighted organisational issues which affected attendance and retention. These included the non-availability of teaching staff, inappropriate or unsatisfactory accommodation and poorly co-ordinated teaching teams. Such teams were often large and had a high proportion of part-time staff or high staff turnover.

We were shocked by the amount of finance in Business Studies and they put two finance units in the first semester; some students couldn't cope.

On the Computer Course (Open College) we had four different teachers in seven weeks.

It was a big course. No-one knew what was going on. People were dropping out all over the place.

Life in college is tough at first because we needed to develop a different way of thinking . . . some students dropped courses because they couldn't cope. (A-level students)

The reasons for withdrawal identified by staff included:

- weak induction
- poor group cohesion
- limited alternative modes of study
- gaps in student timetables
- reduced contact time
- insufficient practical work
- issues related to GNVQ course structure, language and assessment
- the jump between intermediate and advanced-level courses
- poor independent learning skills
- poor basic skills.

Induction

Student responses to induction vary and there are contrasting staff views on what it should contain and how long it should take. Some students were bored and felt their course took too long to get started.

> *We were lectured too much during the induction period, it was boring – a put off.*
>
> *We wandered around college – it was a waste of time.*
>
> *Some trips to industry would have been helpful to help us make our options choice (Engineering). We had too little understanding for such a big decision.*
>
> *The course took too long to get started.*

Some research has suggested that a way of squaring the induction circle is to regard it as a process rather than an event (Martinez, 1997a). If induction is an event, it will have to reconcile the demands of ever more information, familiarisation and orientation with the need to start the course. If it is a process, it offers the opportunity to blend group formation, information giving, hands-on activities, initial assessment and some early work on study skills with course work, over a period of weeks.

> *For four weeks we didn't do any writing; we just talked. So now I am not sure how to deal with (the) subject.*
>
> *More emphasis should be put on developing learning skills at the beginning.*
>
> *We are not developing our time management and study skills well enough.*
>
> *Some students couldn't cope with written work; they were alright on practicals.*

In some colleges induction procedures were well documented, and comprehensive staff and student packs include tutor guidelines and induction checklists. Courses provided induction to a minimum standard, induction programmes were effectively monitored and student perceptions of the induction process and its outcomes were being closely audited.

Particular innovations in some colleges included:

- as part of induction the group agreed a code of conduct on attendance, punctuality, classroom behaviour and late assessments
- students liked their induction programme which gave them opportunities to meet students on courses in Performing Arts, Media, and Leisure and Tourism. They wanted these relationships to continue and contact between first- and second-year students to be encouraged on an ongoing basis
- some colleges introduced courses delivered over 6-12 weeks and accredited through the Open College Network (OCN)
- one college developed a foundation skills module for social science which it delivered in the first term in parallel with A-level.

Both staff and students frequently referred to the benefits of mutually supportive groups. Group cohesion is recognised as an important factor in student retention, and effective social and working relationships need to be fostered. Groups are likely to have a stronger identity where students have similar goals and abilities. Large groups can naturally fragment into small groups, sometimes with tensions between and within them. According to both staff and students, students who do not mix easily or are in a minority with respect to age, gender or ethnicity may be at risk of dropping out and care needs to be taken to ensure they are not marginalised or excluded.

No group dynamic developed – they didn't get us involved with each other at the beginning – some students didn't settle.

Tutors didn't help us come together as a group during induction – some students didn't feel part of the group and left.

I stayed because I had one mate who supported me. (GNVQ student)

Students appreciate induction exercises which contribute to team building, particularly where they have clear objectives and provide feedback on individual and group performance. Mentors can also play an important part in helping students settle in. In one college mentors join the first-year students on their induction programme which includes outward bound and team building activities. Contact with mentors is retained after induction.

Group development for GCSE and A-level students could be particularly problematic. Group activities may need to be incorporated into subject delivery and tutor groups established around related subjects. The development of an A-level centre helped to generate a sense of group identity and opportunities to develop base rooms or other common areas were also being exploited.

Support for students who enrol late is generally an underdeveloped area. Some colleges have developed study packs for late entrants as well as designating student mentors. Rolling induction programmes delivered centrally using a workshop approach can be useful in meeting the needs of students who enrol late as well as those who join established groups on roll-on roll-off programmes.

Flexible delivery

Some colleges were moving towards more flexible delivery, introducing semester arrangements and developing modular and unitised provision. Staff believed that more flexible, unit-based programmes could assist retention by providing alternative modes of study, more limited and more achievable learning goals and more frequent assessment and accreditation opportunities. They could help to develop and maintain motivation and enable partial achievement to be recognised. Some programme areas offered students the choice of attending a three-hour class for 15 weeks or attending a workshop and students are easily able to transfer from one to another.

Partial achievement was recognised through internal college certificates (partly for motivational reasons) and Open College Network (OCN) accreditation. In a few cases, colleges have introduced alternative or parallel accreditation; for example, a two-credit Level 3 OCN unit was matched with an A-level module. Problems yet to be overcome include the adequacy of FEFC funding methodology in relation to unit-based qualification aims and the ability of MIS to track partial achievement. Adequate support also needs to be provided for students who study in this way. Some staff felt that modularisation and flexible delivery have led to a more fragmented student experience and made it more difficult to build relationships, a view echoed by students.

Timetable arrangements

Teachers were particularly critical of reductions in course hours. They felt that weaker students find it difficult to cope and long breaks between lessons are a common source of dissatisfaction. Many courses are still timetabled over four or five days and include a substantial amount of 'slack' time. Students cite free time as a reason for boredom and poor attendance.

> *Some students are only in college for two hours on a particular day. Others have a two-hour lunch break; they go to the pub or into the city centre and don't come back.*
>
> *Timetabling gaps (e.g. three hours without a class) can cause problems of attendance – related to travel arrangements (especially in the afternoon).*
>
> *Some students can't deal with the freedom of time outside timetabled classes for A-levels (15 hours). They don't do anything with their free time, they haven't got a framework of discipline and fall behind. Even when there is nothing on your timetable (in the morning), you can't come into college after 12.00 on some buses.*

If students are required to attend for a lesson or tutorial in the middle of an otherwise free day this can create difficulties for students who travel some distance or want part-time jobs. The result is that they miss sessions and fall behind with course work. The implication is that 'slack time' needs to be reduced to a minimum and private study time should be more formally programmed. Students reported that timetable changes were also unpopular and can threaten part-time employment and disrupt childcare arrangements. Some mature students were dissatisfied with start and finish times and a mismatch in school and college holidays.

Teaching and learning

The importance of sustaining motivation and interest through high quality teaching and learning in retaining students should not be under-estimated. Relevance, variety, stimulation and challenge are all key factors. The links between classroom practice and reasons for poor attendance at certain sessions deserve further investigation. Greater emphasis on self-assessment and

the introduction of classroom observation are likely to encourage a sharper focus on the quality of teaching and learning. Where classroom observation is linked with appraisal this in turn could increase the level of staff development and support available.

Some of our classes are boring – it affects attendance.

The teacher reads from pamphlets/hand outs without explaining – I can't understand.

Most lecturers are understanding and bend over backwards to help us, but some treat us like kids at school, not as grown-ups.

Teachers can be bossy and sometimes make sarcastic remarks when we ask for help – I don't go to their lessons any more.

We have three levels in one group – sometimes tutors concentrate on more vocal (level 3) students and we can't cope at a lower level (secretarial students).

One teacher is really interesting; others are not a patch on him.

Reduced class contact time was perceived as increasing the pressures on both students and teachers. According to the latter, work has to be crammed in. There is no time to make lessons more interesting and this creates difficulty for students with a short attention span.

Teachers differ in their helpfulness and how they explain things – some are much better than others.

Classroom sessions of three and a half hours are too long and boring.

They are always there if you need them; they are always willing to listen; they seem to know when something is wrong and ask if they can help.

The group is too big and the range of ability is too wide. Whether you sink or swim is up to you.

Students can be particularly daunted by the amount of written and theoretical work involved and specific efforts were being made in some colleges to increase the level of practical activity.

We need more activities and more trips out so we can see what's going on.
The title in the prospectus sounded more practical than it is.

Work experience can also be an important motivator. Students frequently referred to the benefits of work experience in reinforcing and supporting learning as well as lending variety to college life. A number of teachers also highlighted the need to build more incentives and short term rewards into students' learning experience.

Issues relating to GNVQ which affect retention include its language, structure and approach to learning and the burden of assessment and portfolio building. This echoes research elsewhere (FEDA, 1998; Davies, 1998). Some students have difficulty in making the transition from GCSE to A-level. A number of part-time students found aspects of their course bore little relationship to the practicalities of the workplace. Students on professional courses who are not employed, or in employment which is not directly related to the course content, may be unable to complete their assignments successfully.

Most students found teachers very helpful, others complained that they did not receive enough help or explanation. Some felt group sizes were too large. Students who found work difficult wanted teachers to spend more time with them.

Workload

Workload is one of the most frequently cited reasons why students drop out. Assessment loads need to be reviewed particularly in relation to GNVQs. Problems in coping with the volume of assignments rather than their level of difficulty are commonplace and students find it hard to cope with heavy workloads when too many assignments are required at once or personal circumstances make it difficult to fulfil requirements at particular times.

We were given an assignment schedule but they haven't stuck to it.

Our assignments have peaks; there are none for six weeks, then bang! The course team isn't planning.

Assignments are not planned by tutors – they don't talk to each other – we can get several together – there is too much pressure – we have eight to finish in three weeks. (BTEC)

However the survey data shows that withdrawn and current students expressed similar levels of agreement about being able to find time to study and having the right amount of coursework, although in neither case was their agreement particularly strong. Parallel research (FEDA, 1998; Davies, 1998) suggests that the problem of workload may be particularly difficult in the GNVQ curriculum and that this may be obscured within this more general survey reported here.

The practice of providing students with schedules, schemes of work and assessment plans varies widely. Assignment schedules need to be carefully planned and implemented and course teams should ensure that assignment deadlines are equitably enforced. Some GNVQ course teams have rationalised assignments to reduce the assessment burden and completion deadlines have been more evenly spread. Specific provision has also been made to support portfolio building.

Many teachers felt that positive feedback is vital in sustaining student motivation and the return of assignments is sometimes a major issue. It is easy to become despondent about poor grades and students need encouragement and support to persist.

Tutors don't give work back for ages so we don't know how we're getting on.

We don't get enough feedback. It is generally poor. (HND student)

We don't have group meetings to see how we have got on. (GNVQ)

Some work marked but with no feedback. Marked work has to go back to file for external moderation (within five minutes) –you don't get a copy. It's frustrating, you can't relate pieces of work.

Some students complained of poor feedback on their work. On the other hand, while adequate and prompt feedback may be important for student achievement, in the survey, levels of satisfaction with feedback did not differentiate withdrawn from current students.

Students can drop out when they fall behind with work and find giving up easier than catching up. Arrangements are not always made to accommodate students needing to catch up but where they are made they are much appreciated. For example, some tutors provide materials packs, additional notes and worksheets for students who have been absent.

> *Tutors are very understanding about childcare difficulties. We are given work to do in the workshop if we miss sessions and tutors arrange for us to do work at home when necessary*

Students questioned the balance of teacher input and assignment work. They felt they were not taught enough and were left too much to their own devices. Under stress, they did not look favourably on supported self study. Any move from group teaching to individual learning needs to be effectively planned and resourced and a resource-based learning approach needs to be adequately supervised. Some students find learning resource centre and workshop staff helpful but others are less satisfied.

> *Teaching hours have been reduced and more time is spent working independently but they don't just tell you to go off and do it, they spend time with you.*
>
> *We are given study time and worksheets but we don't get any help to understand them. About half the group don't bother to do any work.*
>
> *Supported self-study is a joke – (they) give us irrelevant task sheets when we need to do our work.*

The stress of heavy workloads can be exacerbated by issues such as access to computers and support material. A lack of facilities in the library and a shortage of computer work stations and technician support may result in students going home and impact ultimately on retention.

Learning skills and learning support

While students complained of insufficient help and attention, teachers highlighted the need for students to improve their independent learning skills.

> *Students find it difficult to organise themselves and plan properly. They are not good at prioritising what they need to do for assessments or at organising their own work in non-contact time.*

Staff reported that not all students are able to take responsibility for their own learning or cope effectively with independent learning. They need to develop planning, research and study skills, and organisation and time management techniques. Younger students may miss the more formal structure and discipline associated with school. Many have not developed effective time management skills or self-discipline on leaving school.

Teachers also identified poor basic skills as a key factor in relation to retention. Most colleges have introduced initial screening but it is not always comprehensive and diagnostic assessment tools need to be improved and more closely linked to course requirements. In many cases, more needs to be done to identify the additional support needs of part-time students. Some staff described diagnostic tests as offputting and time consuming. In addition to initial screening, course-related learning difficulties need to be identified at an early stage. An early assignment or task can help to identify difficulties and inform course and individual action planning.

Learning support needs to be relevant to course provision if it is to be valued by students and general and course specific support need to reinforce each other. If they don't, students do not take up additional support and tend either not to complete assignments or withdraw when asked to complete written or numerical work. The take-up of learning support is dependent on staff and student attitudes and is often relatively low.

Yes, we were tested for learning support but we'd be embarrassed to go there. They'd think you were thick.

Learning support, we thought it would be one-to-one rather than sitting around wasting valuable time.

Some lessons like basic computing and maths are only there to pad out the course. I don't need them to get a job so I don't go.

Where is student services (study support)? We didn't know about it for the first six months.

Some students question the relevance of key and basic skills support. The implication is that the importance and value of learning support and key skills development need to be effectively promoted to both staff and students. Links between learner support and key skills specialists and course teams also need to be improved not only to increase the relevance of learning support but to enable course teams to support skill development more effectively. In a number of cases, on-course support was identified as a particularly effective strategy at foundation and intermediate level.

Tutorial support

Staff agreed, in the main, that tutorial activity provides opportunities to:

- monitor and support student achievement
- develop close supportive relationships between staff and students
- clarify learning aims and career goals through ongoing personal and academic guidance
- develop learning styles and study skills
- identify personal problems or blocks to learning and make prompt and appropriate referral.

The support of one or more members of staff can be a major factor in retention. Students who were most positive about their tutors saw them as easily accessible, keen to help, and able to make things happen.

If you are away, she rings. It shows she cares. She is never too busy for you.

Personal relationships allow academic and personal problems to be discussed and where there is an effective mechanism for referral to specialist advice or counselling, many problems are dealt with before drop-out occurs.

> *The tutor just goes through the student bulletin and tutorials are really free time. At the beginning it was concerned with academic progress, but that has fizzled out. We don't have any one- to-one reviews and use them (tutorials) to catch up with our work.*
>
> *Tutors don't always sit down and talk to you as they have other things to do.*
>
> *Our personal tutor is not on our side – if you struggle it is because you are not up to it.*
>
> *There are two groups in our course - they only have one-to-one tutoring on one group.*
>
> *Tutorials are not really a review; students are left to identify problems on their own.*
>
> *Some tutors could be more helpful, sit down with you and explain things more fully.*
>
> *Some tutors just do what they are told in tutorials and give out materials.*

Some colleges have well-developed tutorial systems. They have identified a tutorial entitlement, minimum standards, and a comprehensive tutorial policy which is supported by detailed tutor handbooks. However, the quality of tutorial provision is often inconsistent and tutors vary widely in how they interpret their role.

Students disliked frequent staff changes and relationships suffered where tutors are part-time or lack teaching contact with their tutees. They sometimes described their tutors as too busy.

Staff sometimes disagreed about the purpose of tutorials. In one college the consultant concluded that:

> *Some tutors feel the emphasis should be on pastoral support, others feel it should be on monitoring of academic progress and a third group feel the focus should be on information-giving. Tutorial periods are sometimes used to maintain the National Record of Achievement.*

Tutorials potentially have an important part to play not only in monitoring academic progress, attendance and withdrawal and but also in acting as a first point of support and guidance.

Tutors identified a number of key factors limiting their ability to provide effective support. They included timetabling constraints, students being on more than one site, their caseload and overall workload, and difficulty in prioritising across a range of responsibilities. Some suggested that weaker students were less likely to attend tutorials.

Support for tutors

Several colleges identified a need to develop more effective procedures for monitoring the delivery of tutorial provision. Some have appointed senior tutors with a co-ordinating and monitoring function but their responsibilities are not always clearly defined. They felt that support for new or inexperienced tutors should be provided not only through tutor handbooks and resource packs but through effective induction programmes and mentorship schemes. Good practice also needs to be identified and shared.

Many colleges have introduced staff development programmes to support tutors. These commonly include guidance and counselling skills, motivational interviewing and individual action planning. A number of colleges have extended previous work to accredit admissions tutors and are developing a set of competencies for the role of the tutor as a basis for accredited staff development. A team approach can be useful in disseminating good practice as well as supporting and mentoring weaker colleagues and some colleges have introduced tutor support groups.

Transfer arrangements

While transfer arrangements are sometimes well developed, they may not be clearly understood by staff and students. In a number of colleges, a college-wide policy on transfer does not exist.

It is important to provide opportunities to reinforce and clarify intended aims during induction and easy transfer procedures between courses and levels are needed up to realistic cut-off dates. Guidance staff should be

involved during induction to support transfer to other courses and the opportunity for 'right choice' interviews during the first half terms, using personal tutor or student services, should be clearly established. Opportunities to change course need to be promoted as an entitlement and the progress of students who transfer should be systematically tracked.

Given the practical difficulties of providing advice and guidance to very large numbers of part-time students, it would be desirable to follow practice reported elsewhere (Martinez, 1997a). Part-time students should be offered an overview of their course during the first session and the opportunity to transfer or withdraw (without incurring a fee penalty), if the course does not meet their aspirations and needs.

Student support

Both staff and students confirmed the importance of factors associated with the personal circumstances of the student in relation to drop out. These included:

- lack of parental or partner support
- caring and other family commitments
- pregnancy and arranged marriage
- illness
- financial hardship
- benefit problems
- time, distance and cost of travel
- cost of course materials
- the demands of part-time jobs
- progression reasons including students leaving to take up employment (Chapter 2).

Staff also highlighted the importance of:

- limited awareness of how to access help and advice
- inadequate referral and support for vulnerable students
- pressures on time, caseloads and the level of demands on tutors
- lack of recreational activities.

Qualitative evidence concerning the importance of these factors was widely reported in all the colleges. There is, however, some conflict with evidence from other research (Martinez, 1997a; FEDA, 1998; Kenwright, 1996) and indeed with the survey data reproduced here. The most obvious ways of reconciling this apparent conflict is along the following lines:

- personal circumstances may be particularly problematic for some groups of students
- they may not, on their own, strongly differentiate current from withdrawn students
- they may be particularly important in conjunction with one or more college-related factors.

Personal and financial difficulties

Staff emphasised the fact that some students suffered serious emotional and family problems, particularly where they were young and lacked parental support. There were reports of an increasing number of students leaving home and finding it difficult to manage on benefits and grants. In some cases, students in receipt of Job Seekers' Allowance were under pressure to find employment.

Low parental expectations and support can lead to withdrawal. For example, students can be under pressure to contribute to the family income and to find employment or transfer to Youth Training and Modern Apprenticeships. Some course teams have invested time and energy in developing closer links with parents; organising parents' evenings to encourage them to come into college; and introducing regular reports. In a few cases, colleges make home visits.

Financial pressures are considerable and some colleges subsidise travel, materials and childcare costs. Travel costs are a major issue and where travel is free or subsidised students are highly appreciative. One college operates a 'Study Plus' scheme and all 450-hour students benefit from free transport and support for course materials, and are exempt from fees. Another introduced a savings scheme to help students manage registration and examination costs.

A substantial number of students have part-time jobs and find it difficult to balance employment and coursework demands. The implications of employment for the completion of coursework should be made clear in the admissions process and subsequent tutoring. A number of students leave to take up full-time employment where they previously worked part time and teachers reported that employers sometimes creamed off capable students after work experience.

Referral and the role of student services

Students facing external pressures are more likely to be retained if help and guidance are readily available. Strategies for this group include:

- referrals to specialist counselling and advice
- the availability of alternative modes of study when attendance becomes difficult.

A number of colleges had set up an 'employment agency' within student services to channel work experience and part-time employment opportunities. Students are also being guided to alternative programmes or alternative modes of delivery rather than withdrawing completely.

Many staff recognise that student services can make an important contribution to improving student retention and many colleges have strong and accessible student service teams which are well regarded by staff and students. Student services include personal counselling, careers guidance, healthcare and information and advice on financial, benefit and accommodation issues. Students are generally referred to outside agencies where colleges are unable to help them to resolve major problems. Student services may also organise activities which provide opportunities for students to develop extra-curricular interests and enjoy their time at college.

Most students are aware of the services but not always clear about how to access them.

> *I think there is a college counsellor but I wouldn't know where to go to find them.*

Basic information on the services available is often provided in student handbooks and through tutor groups but there may be a need for high profile publicity. Provision on main college sites is often well developed but other sites can be less well served. In some cases, student awareness of the availability of financial help is weak, and access to information and advice on benefits needs to be improved. A few students expressed concern about the possible stigma attached to visiting student services.

Poor or misinformed advice provided by unqualified staff can have far-reaching consequences for continued study. Some college referral systems are underpinned by clear procedures and a shared understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities of student services and course teams. However, tutor- and self-referral are often inconsistent across colleges and strategies are needed to bring student services and course teams closer together. They can include:

- developing the role of student services as a tutorial support resource
- designating a student services liaison role in each curriculum area
- involving student services staff in a senior tutor network and course team meetings.

For example, in some colleges student services are actively involved in induction programmes and activities which support transition. They help to plan summer programmes, provide a resource for course teams through induction and monitor its delivery. Counselling staff offer advice to personal tutors on counselling, interpersonal and tutoring skills; careers guidance staff provide exit interviews and positive guidance for students wishing to withdraw. In some instances, students who have completed their course or achieved a number of units are contacted by student services and offered a 'health check' interview.

Most colleges have yet to develop an effective system of exit counselling and where exit counselling is available, there may be little take-up. Exit counselling can be an important means of encouraging students to return on part-time courses.

College activities and facilities

Activities which develop supportive relationships and a sense of belonging can be crucially important. Social facilities and enrichment or recreational activities are not always well developed and may vary across different sites. Students criticised the lack of social facilities and saw it contributing to poor attendance; staff pointed to the distractions of town-centre sites. While some colleges have established clubs and societies which help students extend their friendships and interests, students are not always well informed

about recreational activities or the student union. A number of colleges have set up student liaison teams to develop joint initiatives with the student union. The main models are:

- a youth and security team – a team of staff with responsibility for organising activities, liaising with the student union and ensuring safety through a low-key presence
- a detached youth worker – funded or part-funded by the LEA to work with the student union and develop drugs and health awareness programmes
- a sabbatical student union post – working in a similar way to detached youth workers and supported by student services staff.

Adult students tend to be less concerned about social activities but were sometimes critical of a predominantly 16-to-19 environment. Sources of dissatisfaction included limited childcare facilities and noisy study centres.

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Chapter 4

Conclusions and messages for colleges

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this discussion of the statistical and survey data. For ease of reference we have divided them into three categories:

- factors affecting drop-out and persistence
- problems and possible solutions
- messages to colleges about possible improvements to the design, delivery and organisation of the curriculum.

Factors affecting drop-out and persistence

1 Within such a large sample, we would expect to replicate some of the patterns which have already been identified at national level.

2 This is largely the case: specifically, male students are more likely to drop-out than female students; students from certain ethnic minorities may be likely to drop out and students whose fees are waived or reduced are more at risk than students who pay full fees.

3 Similarly, students who are identified as needing additional support are more likely to complete their programmes. Students in England for whom colleges claim additional support units (ASUs) and students whose first language is not English are more likely to complete their courses.

4 Aggregate data can often conceal more than it reveals, since variations between colleges in respect of patterns of drop-out by gender, ethnicity and mode of attendance are very substantial.

5 This survey provides conclusive evidence for the first time both that the time needed to travel to college and the timing of applications are significant factors. The further students have to travel and the later their applications, the more likely they are to drop out. As before, however, there are significant exceptions to these generalisations.

6 Prior expectations of college, reported by students, are not in themselves a good predictor of completion. On the other hand, they may be particularly important in specific colleges. Within our sample, there is evidence of perhaps unrealistic expectations which are disappointed and, at other extreme, low expectations which are either fulfilled or modified in the light of subsequent experience.

7 Overall, withdrawn students are more likely than current students to report that they found it more difficult to make friends easily at the beginning of their course and less likely to report that their tutor helped them settle in to their course.

8 Withdrawn students are much more likely than current students to believe that they have not been placed on the most appropriate course. Indeed, this is the best predictor of student drop-out.

9 Withdrawn students are less likely than current students to agree that their course is interesting and that they are satisfied with the quality of teaching and that they have good relationships with teachers.

10 Timetabling issues are significant: current students are more likely to agree that the timing of their course is convenient.

11 Progression issues are also significant: current students are more satisfied with the help that they receive either to go to university or to progress into employment.

12 Conversely, degrees of satisfaction with college facilities are not good predictors of drop-out or persistence. If anything, withdrawn students indicate that they are more satisfied than current students with such facilities and with access to IT equipment.

13 Student evaluations which relate ultimately either to their study skills or to their confidence in their study skills are also poor predictors of drop-out. Withdrawn students agree to the same extent or more than current students that they can find time to study, that their course is not too difficult, and that the level of course work is appropriate.

14 Personal circumstances can be significant, particularly for specific groups of students. Students aged 35-55 are more likely than others to agree that they experience financial hardships; students aged 19-24 are least likely to agree.

15 Younger students aged 16-18 are most likely to agree that their family circumstances had changed during their course and that they had experienced health or personal problems.

16 With the notable exception of being on the right course, all of the above generalisations about student perceptions and evaluations are subject to major variations at the college level.

17 Student destinations, finally, are not the same as reasons for dropping out. Withdrawn students who report financial hardship are no more likely than those who do not, to seek employment as a destination rather than an alternative (for example, another course).

Student drop-out: problems and solutions

This discussion of problems and solutions is intended to be brief and is defined largely in the form of problems identified by students and teachers interviewed in the course of this research.

Two points of warning should be sounded. It is not intended as a comprehensive checklist of good practice. Rather, it summarises the sort of 'presenting problems' perceived by students and teachers and identifies possible ways forward. These solutions are almost all derived from the colleges that took part in the research and can therefore be seen as an opportunity to share experience between colleges.

Within this perspective, we imply rather than prescribe a set of managerial actions. Problems concerning curriculum strategy or portfolios, or unacceptable variations in tutoring, for example, are not specified here. Management tasks and strategies will arise from a consideration of how to develop and apply the solutions or, perhaps, from an analysis of why actions already taken are not delivering their intended benefits.

Problems	Solutions
Incorrect or inappropriate expectations on the part of students	● Improved college and course publicity ● Links to partner schools ● Pre-course briefings ● Taster sessions ● Interview guidance ● Specialist guidance ● Presentation of course / programme overviews and expectations during induction process ● Involvement of current students
Inappropriate parental guidance or influence	● Parental involvement in open days, interview, general and specialist guidance

Problems	Solutions
Low self esteem and poor motivation	See "Early problems settling in" (overleaf)
Incorrect course placement	● Presentation of course/programme overview and expectations during induction ● Early formative evaluation ● Clear entry criteria ● Early clarification of progression aims ● Arrangements to facilitate early course transfer ● Initial assessment and diagnostic procedures ● Freestanding induction/taster/introduction modules
Withdrawals between application and enrolment	● Buddy schemes ● Introductory programme ● Keeping in contact strategies ● Tracking and follow-up procedures ● Survey a sample of students who decide not to enrol
Feelings of isolation or not belonging	● Tutoring, peer support/coaching/mentoring ● Opportunities for collaborative learning and group projects ● Recreational and social activities ● Working in partnership with the students' union ● Social facilities ● Working in partnership with youth workers

Problems	Solutions
Early problems settling in	● Induction as a process ● Peer support/coaching/mentoring ● Confidence building exercises ● Early introduction to hands-on activity ● Group forming and team building activities ● Early formative evaluation ● Structured opportunities to meet students on other courses ● Presentation of course/programme overview and expectations ● Orientation sessions ● Study packs for late entrants ● Arrangements to facilitate transfer ● Opportunities for part-time students to withdraw from or change course (first sessions)
Early difficulties with course work	● Limited and more manageable learning goals ● Monitoring of early progress ● Early review and action planning ● Referral to learning support or on-course support ● Flexible and targeted tutor support ● Initial development of study skills ● Sequenced, structured course work of progressive difficulty ● Opportunities for collaborative learning and group projects ● Integration of practical and theoretical work ● Diagnosis of learning styles ● Differentiation by task or assessment

Problems	Solutions
Problems with progress on programme	● Review of relationship between timetabling, independent learning and free time in relation to curriculum model and intended learning outcomes ● Supportive feedback on course work ● Review and action planning ● Referral to learning support ● Development of time management and study skills ● Varied and stimulating teaching strategies ● Prompt investigation of reasons for poor attendance ● Review of assessment policy and practice ● Review of teaching styles, mix and strategies ● Opportunities for work experience and integration of careers guidance ● Scheduling of assessment and equitable enforcement of assessment deadlines ● Catch up opportunities
Basic skills problems	● Entitlement rather than a deficit model for additional support ● Early screening and diagnostic assessment ● Integration of basic skills with programme delivery ● Referral to learning support and monitoring of take-up by subject or personal tutor ● Where additional support is provided separately, monitoring student progress by subject or personal tutor

Problems	Solutions
Personal and financial difficulties	● Childcare support, effective liaison with benefit agencies ● Pastoral tutoring ● Referral to specialist support either within or outside the college (e.g. counselling, financial advice, healthcare, accommodation) ● Equitable access to financial support ● Subsidised or free travel ● Subsidised or free course materials ● Employment services (e.g. job clubs, employment agencies, employability training, careers advice and guidance)

Messages for colleges: measures to improve retention

Messages in this area largely echo and reiterate conclusions which have been drawn from the existing work of a number of colleges and adult education services (Martinez, 1997a) and can, therefore, be summarised quite briefly. A more detailed list of interventions developed in the different colleges is illustrated in the second set of conclusions.

1 Issues around appropriate placement on courses emerge very clearly from this work. The implication is that, notwithstanding all the excellent progress which has already been achieved, there is still more to be done in terms of information and advice giving, guidance, transparent entry criteria, initial assessment and selection to place students on the most appropriate courses.

2 Students' sociability is the second major message. The most positive aspect of college for most students is other students. The implication is that efforts to promote group formation, facilitate purposeful socialisation and support collaborative approaches to learning will pay great dividends.

3 Pedagogy is the third major issue. Students are overwhelmingly positive in their evaluation of teachers and teaching and yet the survey outcomes support the view that improvements are possible in providing more stimulating, interesting and enjoyable learning opportunities.

4 Timetabling issues are both significant and – on their own – intractable. On the one hand, inconvenient course timings and schedules are likely to contribute to withdrawal. On the other hand, resource constraints, logistical problems and the variety of individual student circumstances militate against a straightforward technical solution. Further, posited solutions such as resource-based learning, open learning or supported learning are all predicated on assumptions that students will acquire the study skills and habits of learning needed to make them more autonomous and resourceful learners. The evidence from the survey suggests that such assumptions are problematic (see page 113, no. 13).

5 The implication here is that issues of timetabling and flexibility need to be tackled simultaneously with the development of student learning capabilities and learning skills. Some colleges have already drawn this conclusion in respect of their curriculum model (see the relevant section in Martinez, 1997a).

6 Evidence concerning lesser degrees of satisfaction among younger students and the different impact of health and personal problems, hardship and changes in family circumstances tends to draw attention to the need for pastoral and student support functions in colleges, delivered mainly through advice and guidance, tutoring and counselling services.

Chapter 5

Information and quality systems

The discussion to this point demonstrates that effective action to achieve higher rates of student completion is not straightforward. In particular:

- student persistence and drop out are determined often by very local contexts and conditions
- information may be plentiful but partial or incomplete
- the views of students and staff may be in conflict and subject to bias
- the issues themselves are complex and invariably cut across systems and structural boundaries, even in small colleges.

This chapter therefore focuses on two key areas of management responsibility which relate to the ability of colleges to identify and understand their own reasons for persistence and drop-out and their ability to act upon this information through their existing arrangements for quality control and assurance (quality systems).

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Management information systems

Management information systems generally provide information on enrolment and retention at the three census points, individual student details and progression between year 1 and 2 of two-year courses with some details of students who have withdrawn. Data on reasons for withdrawal tends to be more limited. Management information systems have the potential to generate a range of useful information but many colleges are only beginning to explore their full use. MIS can generate comparative reports at programme and course-team level and monitor the financial implications of withdrawal. In practice the use of management information is often inconsistent and routine reports on comparators, profiles and performance against targets have yet to be developed.

The priorities informing the development of management information systems have been student tracking and the generation of claims for funding. With respect to drop-out and retention, management information can be used to:

- track student achievement or partial achievement
- provide an accurate picture of retention and drop-out at all levels
- generate information to provide a basis for monitoring and management decision-making.

A range of information systems are used to monitor student attendance and retention. Some are operated at a local level; some are operated at local level and used to inform central data collection; and some are operated centrally through the analysis of course and institutional data. The main information systems supporting work to promote student completion include:

- MIS data on enrolments, completion, withdrawal and achievement
- records of applications and interviews
- locally completed course registers
- MIS data on the cause of student non-completion usually based on tutor-designated reasons for withdrawal

- a student monitoring and tracking system using MIS which generates an enquiry letter or an internal cause for concern note
- a student monitoring and tracking system operated by course teams (poor or failed attendance may generate a letter or telephone call from the subject or personal tutor)
- a formal record of assessment of student achievements held by individual teachers
- student evaluations usually conducted two or three times a year at course level
- the course review and evaluation process
- the college ISR
- research projects usually targeted on withdrawn students.

The MIS is often limited in:

- the ability to track student achievement at module or sub-qualification level
- the identification and profiling of reasons for withdrawal
- the provision of accurate and timely reports
- the provision of reports tailored to the needs of intended users.

Tracking systems

Manual registers provide the main means by which students are tracked and attendance monitored. Some colleges have introduced electronic registration systems which are able to provide extensive data on individual and group performance. Where register information is not scanned or input into an electronic format, colleges rely on the insights and observations of teachers to detect patterns of poor or non-attendance. This creates consequent difficulties in:

- monitoring the progress of individual students as the curriculum becomes more flexible and students pursue multiple qualification aims
- identifying patterns of poor or non-attendance in relation to specific weeks, days, sessions or teachers
- identifying patterns of student withdrawal on a week-by-week basis through the academic year.

A variety of electronic solutions have been developed in response to these issues, with three main variants:

- swipe cards to record attendance at each session
- optical mark reading of registers
- manual input of registers to an electronic format.

The last system is the least costly in terms of hardware and software and data can be directly entered onto a college network or a local database or spreadsheet. Even without any other enhancement it can provide sufficient information to investigate possible relationships between patterns of attendance and withdrawal in relation to course structure, format and content. In the absence of immediate electronic solutions, procedures should be audited so that good practice can be shared and common systems established.

It is difficult to generate an overview for students who are not enrolled on a single course but attend a number of courses. This is the case for GCSE or GCE A-level students and students with multiple qualification aims. There are also difficulties in tracking students on modular programmes and in distinguishing between students who have successfully completed a module from students who have withdrawn. With a shift towards more modular programmes there is an increasing need to track achievement at sub-qualification level. MIS developments need to keep pace with curriculum development and the capacity of MIS to record module or unit achievement will be important if achievement units for partial achievement by withdrawn students are to be recorded.

Attendance monitoring and follow-up

Systems for following up absence and withdrawal which work well include:

- prompt telephone follow-up of absence
- interviewing students in more detail where attendance is poor and following through the outcomes of such discussions
- offering guidance interviews to students who decide to withdraw and recording these reasons.

Many tutors monitor attendance closely in the early stages of a course and actively follow up poor attendance.

After students miss two or three classes, tutors contact them by telephone and after three consecutive weeks' absence they receive a letter. Some tutors phone on the first day of absence, others after two weeks. Most students are expected to phone in when absent, but not all do so.

A number of colleges lack a unified system of absence notification and absence follow-up letters are not always in a friendly and supportive tone or available in a variety of languages.

Where special incentive schemes have been introduced to improve retention and achievement they are not always successful.

> *The college has introduced a bursary scheme offering a financial incentive for good attendance and behaviour. Most students were aware of it but it was not a key motivating factor. Some described it as a 'con', others thought they were unlikely to benefit as they had not met assignment deadlines.*

Considerable variation exists in teacher practice. Staff are sometimes unclear about college criteria for authorised absence and systems for recording and responding to late arrival. Some teachers insist on high attendance while others fail to show particular concern; some tutors phone parents and send letters or postcards, others do not. While some young people resented tutors telephoning their parents most accepted it. Students 'at risk' of dropping out are commonly discussed at course team meetings and tutors sometimes ensure that absent students complete the work they miss. Follow-up tends to be less effective where tutors have a large caseload or are part time. Tutors complained of a lack of time to follow up student absence and in some colleges this is done by administrative staff.

In one college, for example, there is a clear administrative system for managing the withdrawal process and student deposits are repaid once the necessary documentation has been completed. Exit counselling is undertaken by personal tutors and heads of division.

In many colleges there would be a benefit in reviewing follow-up and exit procedures across the institution. Review should include the role of student services and central and faculty administrative staff in tracking students and gathering more useful information on reasons for poor attendance and withdrawal as well as maintaining contact and offering further support.

Reasons for leaving

Student tracking and follow-up from the first point of contact to enrolment is generally underdeveloped. Information on students who apply to the college may be held on a database but there is often no systematic follow-up to identify why they fail to arrive in September. Some colleges have successfully introduced surveys (100% or sample surveys) and students are offered an inducement to complete a questionnaire which asks them about the course they are currently doing, their reasons for preferring another provider and their perceptions of the college offer.

The reasons students leave during a course are usually recorded on withdrawal forms. Many colleges have a range of standard documents which may complement or duplicate local systems. For example, a specially designed form was introduced by one faculty to enable A-level tutors to obtain more detailed information on the reasons and timing of student withdrawal.

Withdrawal forms are completed when a student is deemed to have left, normally either by non attendance or by formal notification from the student. Reasons for leaving are usually identified by tutors and allocated a code. The number of reasons varies significantly between colleges, with one college providing a choice of three reasons (financial, employment, personal) and another offering 23. In many colleges, the number of students whose reasons for leaving were specified as 'other' or 'unknown' was substantial. Sometimes 'unknown' was the most frequently used category.

Thus, one college recorded a total of 848 withdrawals: 401 (47%) were placed in the category of reasons not known and a further 8% in the broad category of non-specified personal reasons, giving a total of 55% of students leaving without the reason being known.

> *We put 'unknown' on the form because we've given up trying to track them down. A letter is just junk mail. We have to keep course numbers up so we keep hanging on. It can be 6-8 weeks before we use the pro forma.*

As well as evidence being incomplete, reasons for leaving are often not consistently or accurately captured at source. For example:

- staff are not always clear about the need for destination data and vary in how they use the designated categories
- where tutors are asked to assign a single reason for withdrawal this leads to the oversimplification of a complex of inter-related reasons
- students can be reluctant to express what they feel might be a criticism of their teachers by referring to course-related reasons.

Colleges need to establish a workable set of reasons for leaving, with guidelines on identifying them. Where substantial numbers are leaving for unspecified reasons college documentation should be reviewed. In some cases, although withdrawal forms are passed to the MIS unit, reasons for leaving are not entered or analysed. One college had no system at all at faculty or college level for collating and analysing information on reasons for withdrawal which were stored manually.

At-risk profiling

None of the colleges included in the survey had introduced a system of 'at risk' profiling to identify students particularly vulnerable to drop-out because of poor motivation or adverse personal circumstances. An at-risk profile may score positive and negative factors which influence decisions to withdraw or continue on a course. For example, a late start, part-time jobs, vagueness about personal goals and acknowledged lack of parental or partner support score negatively and clear personal goals, good entry qualifications and a high level of motivation score positively. This provides an index figure for each student indicating the degree of risk of drop-out against which to score criteria derived from tutors' own experiences, experiences at other colleges and statistical indicators derived through MIS (e.g. significant relationships between postcode and drop-out). An 'at-risk' profile can begin at initial interview and be reviewed and amended through tutorials. For an example of the identification of at-risk factors, see Vallender (1998).

The development of a system of at-risk monitoring could encourage better targeting of tutorial provision to support more vulnerable students. This could be piloted across a small range of courses with a view to extending it across all courses with significant drop-out. Guidelines for tutors to use in assessing "at-risk" signals would be needed as well as a means of recording them for follow-up on entry.

MIS could provide a database for use as a tool for identifying an "at risk" or withdrawal profile to inform and focus strategies to improve retention. The analysis should enable appropriate data to be reported regularly in respect of, for example, course location, postcode, age, gender and ethnicity, mode of attendance, date of application, and financial and other support. If possible, it should provide a means of relating retention to course transfer, the take-up of learning support and approaches to student services.

Access to information

Some staff feel they are operating in something of an information vacuum. They do not have ready access to college MIS (or ISR) or useful comparator information. This precludes them from reviewing patterns of attendance and withdrawal in relation to age, gender and ethnicity and comparing their own performance with college absence and withdrawal rates. Instead anecdotal evidence and beliefs about the problems students face persist without quantitative information to support them.

There is often a wide divergence in the accuracy of information held centrally and locally and between information held in different parts of the management information system (the ISR and student database where these are separate). Staff frequently perceive MIS data as inaccurate, out of date and providing a limited service for management. The accuracy of MIS reports, however, depends on the accurate capture of withdrawal information by staff. Further problems include:

- delays in entering data on the system
- the multiple counting of A-level students
- distinguishing between withdrawal and transfer (students shown as withdrawn may have transferred)

- students 'disappearing' at the end of the first year of a two-year programme because of inaccurate recording of transfer and progression details
- confusion between withdrawal and completion on roll-on, roll-off courses
- withdrawal and fresh enrolment of students who have missed a few weeks attendance, but who subsequently rejoin their course.

In some colleges course tutors are able to request print outs on attendance but if the data is inaccurate this facility is little used. A mistrust of MIS can result in duplication of collection of information rather than rationalisation. For example, where paper-based registers are no longer used staff tend to maintain their own records. In order to improve staff confidence in the system it is important that all staff understand the need for accurate and timely information. In some colleges the credibility of MIS is established and staff are able to access MIS through the college network:

> *Managers and staff are able to obtain an update on course withdrawals, check the student record, and tag 'active' or 'withdrawn' as well as 'applied' and 'enrolled' on all information. The MIS is capable of producing monthly print outs for each course.*

Staff are sometimes unaware of the information available:

> *Staff tend to regard the information which can be readily accessed through MIS as 'just more paper'. They are unaware that there is access to the college menu which provides a wide range of management data and that they can have a personal menu allowing them to interrogate the system on-line and obtain specific course-related information.*

Staff training and the location of hardware are crucial if effective use is to be made of performance data. The development of a college Intranet can open up the possibility of moving away from reports to providing information on demand but this facility may not be available to staff on all sites.

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Reporting

Where systems are relatively well developed their potential may not be fully exploited. In one college, for example, registers were optically marked and the college MIS produced a list of students absent for three or more consecutive classes. The system automatically triggered a letter which was sent out centrally. While the software used by the college to process ISR data was able to identify patterns and trends in attendance and withdrawal, this had not so far been used.

Expectations can be low and curriculum directors and programme managers may not receive regular reports on retention rates, student profiles or a summary analysis of the reasons for withdrawal. In some colleges, reports are provided on request but information may not be shared or used consistently across the college. Most colleges, however, have yet to institute routine reports on withdrawal and retention.

In another college the register team supplies reports to tutors on request which clearly indicate attendance patterns and state the percentage attendance; and some tutors use the print outs with individual students and show them to parents. The frequency with which tutors and programme managers request the reports varies across programme areas. Curriculum directors receive monthly MIS reports on course enrolments and withdrawals and a profile of GNVQ and A-level courses. However, this information is not necessarily shared with programme managers. The college is now planning how to provide reports on all courses on a regular basis.

Colleges need to agree what information is required to monitor retention across the college. Statistics need to be disaggregated at various organisational levels to enable the cross-college comparison of performance and retention profiles and the monitoring of trends. In taking this forward, colleges should consult closely with users at all levels on the format and type of comparator information most helpful to them.

Where colleges have provided information on patterns of attendance and withdrawal, particularly benchmark and comparator information, this has helped staff appreciate the relative standing of their programmes and engage more positively with retention issues. Colleges which have set up MIS user

groups representing different interests have found them helpful in developing a shared understanding of the application of management information and users' requirements. A staff development programme may help to increase staff awareness of how best to provide, access and use management information and the college's student database to improve retention.

College-based research

College experience reviewed here also suggests the need for some additional research to be conducted at college level. This could take several forms, none of which is particularly resource intensive:

- research conducted as part of a postgraduate qualification
- early formative evaluation
- surveying student views
- specific research projects.

It is evident from informal contacts that a significant number of college staff are already undertaking research projects around student retention issues to fulfil the requirements of postgraduate qualifications in management or teaching. There is every reason to optimise the benefits of such projects by negotiating these with appropriate college managers.

If the point of research is to make improvements and identify problems before they arise, there are many advantages in encouraging course teams to conduct straightforward evaluations with their students in the second or third week of programmes. A process along these lines (initial course review) has been developed at Lambeth College and is reviewed in Martinez et al. (1998). The process has five main objectives:

- to identify vulnerable students and students who may not have been appropriately placed on the course
- to 'test the temperature' of the group
- to identify any mismatches between student and staff expectations
- to suggest possible improvements
- to create a greater sense of shared ownership of the course between students and teachers.

There are at least four main types of student survey work which could either complement or partially replace current work on gathering feedback on student perceptions of college. Sampling the views of students who apply but do not enrol will help to make clear the reasons for student choice before course commencement. It will also, incidentally, provide useful marketing information and feedback on the effectiveness of promotional and interviewing procedures and the mechanisms colleges have to support and encourage students between application and enrolment.

Focus group or other research conducted with students on courses with particularly high or low retention rates facilitates the sharing of good practice and the identification of particular problems.

The views of current students, thirdly, may help to shed light on the reasons some of their peers have dropped out. Braintree College (not one of the project colleges), generated a large amount of useful information by asking current second-year students three questions:

- Have you ever thought of leaving?
- What prompted you to think of leaving?
- What helped you to stay?

Finally, some specific research projects have been undertaken at course, programme or departmental level usually focused on identifying problems and testing solutions. Examples of these are given in Knowsley (1995), and Martinez et al. (1998). There is, in addition, the option of more ambitious projects either undertaken internally or with the help of external researchers such as FEDA.

Quality systems

Colleges are looking at their quality assurance arrangements in the light of the FEFC framework and the move towards self-assessment. Their thinking will be informed, in particular, by the current steps to improve quality in colleges (FEFC, 1998a) and the new framework for 'accrediting' colleges (FEFC 1998b). Quality assurance should involve systems for:

- setting standards
- obtaining feedback from students on aspects of provision important to their experience of college
- reviewing feedback at course team level including feedback from students, moderators, external verifiers and course team members
- planning and resourcing improvements.

Quality assurance arrangements should allow colleges to identify and investigate the reasons for disparity in delivery between courses and departments, and differences in the perceptions of quality between current and withdrawn students. While colleges will be aware of major quality gaps, the effect of poor quality on drop-out in specific areas may be more difficult to spot.

Comparative performance indicators and benchmarks need to be identified and used for monitoring purposes. Some colleges have set an overall retention target and a number of colleges use MIS reports to inform target-setting at different levels:

> *Retention targets are set annually in January. The process begins in November at faculty level when course teams and heads of faculty discuss and agree targets for all courses. The targets, individual and aggregated, are examined in detail and agreed between the head of faculty and director of studies for the subsequent three years and incorporated into college plans.*

In colleges where target setting works, a sense of ownership is engendered by involving the corporation, senior managers and course teams in the process and through effective monitoring and action planning. A number of colleges have sought to raise staff awareness of the financial implications of student withdrawal and to create a shared understanding and ownership of retention issues. In some cases, this has led to the development of detailed operational plans in order to achieve the targets agreed.

One college ran a whole college staff development event for teaching and non-teaching staff on what teams could do to improve retention and achievement. Subsequent events focused on issues relating to GNVQ and black Caribbean students. Following these events each directorate developed an action plan.

The commitment by some senior managers to monitoring withdrawal and its impact on class size and efficiency is generally strong. For example, in one college, senior managers meet curriculum managers to review course performance and intervene where retention is weak; programme managers are required to explain poor performance and produce action plans. One faculty head countersigned all withdrawal forms to ensure they provided a comprehensive explanation of the reasons for withdrawal. In some cases, course applications, enrolments and the reasons students fail to take up places are also scrutinised.

Student evaluations

Colleges vary considerably in how often they survey student views. Practice can be inconsistent and some course teams design their own questionnaires. Evaluations of enrolment and induction may also be undertaken by student services. Some surveys cover a limited range of topics and it is important to ensure that the questions asked provide effective feedback on issues relevant to student retention. Overall responsibility for analysing the data and communicating the findings should be clearly defined.

> *The quality manager analyses the survey results and issues a report to inform the college of issues for concern and possible action. Cross college and course-specific outcomes are presented in the reports with a commentary and reference to college standards.*

It is crucial that results inform decision-making and action-planning by course teams.

> *The college has a centralised system for surveying student perceptions. Data is analysed at course, programme and college level and teams are required to take action in response to student feedback. A college-level*

analysis is presented to curriculum directors, the principalship and the corporation and a summary analysis is also provided for students and included in the staff newsletter. Survey data has been used to inform college decision-making on issues such as the college refectory.

Student focus groups may be helpful in exploring particular issues relating to retention and could be more widely used.

The college has used focus groups to gather student views on issues such as the student charter, student handbooks, course information booklets, sports facilities, and there is a college refectory quality circle.

It is important that students have effective channels for expressing their views and that they are listened and responded to. Course representatives can be useful in communicating student views and there is scope to extend the system. However, students do not always know who their representative is and some representatives feel constrained in what they are allowed to ask.

A number of colleges have introduced a student forum to improve student feedback and one set up a forum specifically for GNVQ students.

Course reviews

In many colleges the potential of college quality systems for addressing retention issues is not fully realised.

The course quality file is at the heart of the college system. In theory, retention should form an agenda item for course team meetings during the year and staff should log reasons for leaving immediately and incorporate them in the quality file. In practice, retention does not have a high profile as part of ongoing review. The main spur to action is the annual course review for the college Quality Committee which requires statistical information on retention and leads to action plans.

Retention is commonly monitored through the completion of course review pro formas which ask for data on retention together with information on enrolments and success rates. Pro formas completed by course teams feed into performance review at departmental or faculty level.

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Retention is formally monitored at course and faculty level through termly and end of course reviews. Retention targets are included on the front sheet used to record statistical information.

However, not all pro formas identify targets for retention or require performance to be monitored against college standards or the performance of the previous year. Where targets are set, teams may lack the information they need for effective self assessment and even where retention problems are identified, action may be limited.

Chapter 6

Information and quality systems: conclusions

Messages to colleges

1 Beyond the obvious messages concerning the need to monitor and improve quality, the survey and statistical data provide compelling evidence that much managerial effort in terms of MIS and quality arrangements may be mis-directed.

2 Specifically, the high degree of variation in patterns of persistence and withdrawal between and within colleges suggests that far more attention needs to be given to the analysis, interpretation and research of the college's own circumstances. Such analyses will, moreover, be enriched by internal comparisons (to understand variations in the college) and external comparisons (to understand variations from the norm in colleges with similar student populations and curricula).

3 In their present form, the sort of evaluation and feedback procedures operated by most colleges (notably SPOC surveys) are unlikely to provide high quality information commensurate with the effort spent in gathering it. Specifically, evaluations from courses with 'low' rates of retention may often be quite similar to those arising from courses with 'intermediate' retention rates.

4 In conjunction with the other evidence, this suggests that a less precise mechanism for gaining early and formative evaluation may ultimately be a more useful basis for improvement. Teachers should take responsibility but share this with students. It is likely, in addition, to provide a basis for identifying individual students who may feel particularly uncomfortable, dissatisfied or even misplaced. There is some qualitative evidence from other research (notably the Lambeth case study in Martinez, 1998) that this approach is much more useful.

5 At the risk of stating the obvious, the A-level and, by extension, a unitised or modular curriculum, will need to be monitored on a subject or unit basis.

6 Comparative performance indicators and benchmarks need to be identified and used for monitoring purposes.

7 Targets will need to be established and performance monitored against such targets. This will work best if targets are negotiated rather than imposed and if the corporation, senior managers and course teams are involved in the process.

8 Colleges need to agree what information is required to monitor retention across the college. Statistics should be disaggregated at various organisational levels to enable cross-college comparisons of performance and the monitoring of trends.

9 Given the significance of pedagogic issues, a further conclusion concerns the provision, ownership and supply of data concerning patterns of persistence and drop-out. Unless such information is made available to teachers and course teams, preferably with internal and external comparator information, the key actors in the process will have little or no information against which they can evaluate their own performance.

10 Staff training, the development of MIS and access to hardware will be crucial to give effective access to this information.

11 Significant variations between and within colleges suggest, moreover, that alongside improvements in quantitative information, a useful focus for managerial activity would be qualitative research to achieve a better understanding of such variations, particularly between broadly similar curriculum areas and broadly similar student groups in the same college.

12 In circumstances of limited resources and managerial time, some more intangible measures to improve aspects of the student experience (student-student and teacher-student relationships, pedagogy and curriculum design) are likely to have a greater impact on retention than improvements to accommodation or equipment.

13 Continuing problems over the usefulness of MIS data suggest that colleges not only need to audit their current arrangements, but that a cross-college user group should undertake this task, comprising an MIS specialist, curriculum managers, teachers and business support staff.

14 There are substantial variations in teacher and tutor practice even within the same college in the way that registers are completed, even where detailed procedures have already been established. This suggests a need to audit the operation of procedures, modify them if necessary and undertake staff development and subsequent monitoring.

15 Colleges need to consider the costs and benefits of the different electronic options to record and monitor attendance.

16 Wide variations in practice within the same college indicate the need for a unified approach to register completion, notifying lateness, absence notification and follow-up.

16 Student tracking and follow-up procedures need to commence from first contact with a college rather than (as is usually the case) from enrolment.

17 Most of the current systems for identifying the reasons for drop-out do not function effectively. Colleges need to review their current arrangements with a view to standardising procedures around follow-up and exit processes.

18 More proactively, research undertaken with current students, with students on courses with a high or low retention rate and in the context of specific research projects will provide useful information to support improvement strategies.

19 Follow-up and exit procedures need to be reviewed and standardised across colleges.

Messages to funding and inspection agencies

1 To support some of the recommendations at college level, there is a need for additional support from inspection and funding agencies.

2 One of the most helpful steps will be the planned provision to English colleges of software which will enable them to interrogate and analyse their own ISR information.

3 Better understanding of patterns of persistence and drop-out within a college will be facilitated immensely, however, by the planned provision of appropriate and sensitive benchmarking information. As we have seen, aggregate national data are much less illuminating than detailed information concerning performance at the level of individual colleges or categories of college. Comparator information will help colleges understand their own characteristics in terms of the differential impact of gender, ethnicity, age, mode of attendance, fee remission policies, etc. All this information is currently buried in the ISR. This is anticipated in FEFC, 1998a.

4 Given the current state of our knowledge and the degree of unexplained variance, however, it is almost certainly too soon to place detailed data of this sort, which would identify individual colleges, in the public domain.

5 It is time to adopt a different performance measure for 'continuation' and, by proxy, completion. We have already criticised the measure currently used by the FEFC – in-year continuation from the first to the third

consensus date – elsewhere (notably in Martinez, 1997a). The case for better discrimination by assessing completion in relation to initial enrolment is unanswerable. Changes currently planned by FEFC (1998c) will not address the issue of early drop-out.

6 Although it has been noted almost in passing, the evidence from broadly similar colleges of the high variation in percentages of students for whom additional support units are claimed, suggests a further reason for the review of the funding mechanism in England. The issue is not one of audit; it is the extent to which the policies embedded in the funding mechanism have led to unexpected and undesirable consequences in terms of skewed provision.

7 Although it is a stock in trade of researchers to identify a need for further research, the evidence presented here suggests that there is a need to undertake further research in a number of areas, notably in respect of drop-out and persistence:

- by subject, qualification, type and level
- by type of college
- in longitudinal studies.

8 In England (as distinct from Wales), the funding agency needs to address the issue of funding qualification aims which are not complete qualifications.

Messages to Government

1 The messages from this research tend to underline the importance of the new quality improvement strategy for colleges outlined in FEFC 1998a and 1998b.

2 Particular issues around the expectations and motivation of younger students highlighted here suggest strongly that reward (i.e. funding) mechanisms need to be reviewed to encourage school-college partnerships. The evidence that the transition to post compulsory education is difficult, reinforces evidence presented to the Kennedy Committee to the same effect (FEFC, 1997c).

3 Greater drop-out rates among some categories of students whose fees are reduced or waived, together with more detailed evidence from the ISR concerning drop-out by students whose income consists of benefits, underline the need for sensitive and effective implementation of 'welfare to work' policies together with a careful monitoring of outcomes.

4 The problems of student hardship need to be addressed in at least three ways. First, the loans should should be extended to FE students on terms no less favourable than those available to HE students.

5 Second, there is a substantial case for a dramatic increase in the volume of Access funds available to colleges.

6 Third, if the principle of financial support to 16-19 year olds in full-time education is to be retained, the relative merits of the present universal system (Child Benefit) should be evaluated against the merits of a means-tested system (through allowances or grants).

7 Perhaps the most difficult message to convey concerns the publication of PISA information. The publication of league tables of raw A levels and GNVQ outcomes have been the subject of sustained criticism by colleges since their inception. Colleges (and FEDA) have argued that such information mis-represents college performance both because it is crude (i.e. raw) and because it omits much of the work undertaken by colleges. The statistical evidence presented here, particularly concerning patterns of drop-out and persistence, suggests very strongly that there is no 'quick fix'. Until there is a better understanding of variations between colleges, the publication of more detailed data could obscure more than it illuminates.

8 This point is technical but extremely important and can be demonstrated quite easily. 'Value added' has been mooted as an ingredient of more detailed public reporting. Even where value-added methodologies which capture the average 'distance travelled' by students from GCSE to A level – in a given institution – are relatively robust and well understood, FE colleges regularly score less highly than most categories of school and than sixth form colleges. This is because of the smaller number of A-level subjects typically studied by FE college students, rather than lower levels of effectiveness.

9 The collection dates for PISA data appear to give rise to regular under-reporting of achievement where the completion of (say) a GNVQ is achieved after the end of the designated final year of study. This issue needs to be addressed.

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Appendices

1 Student survey: validity of the sample

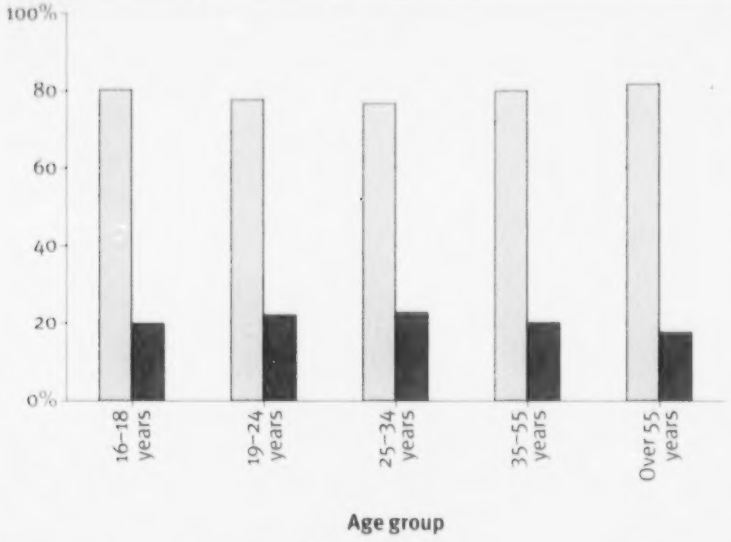
The issues here concern the validity of the sample. Is the overall profile of respondents broadly similar to the profile of the target student populations?

Age of respondents

The majority of students who completed the questionnaire were aged 16-18 (58.9%) and almost three quarters were aged 16-24 (74.6%). This is not surprising. The majority of colleges (19/31) chose to focus their research on younger, full-time students. Only one college elected to focus on adult students. The remaining 11 colleges looked at a cross-section of their courses which usually included a substantial proportion of full-time courses with predominantly younger students. These choices are reflected in the profile of survey respondents which is broadly representative of the target student populations.

Figure 23 below shows the age distribution of respondents. It demonstrates a fairly consistent proportion in each category of withdrawn to current students.

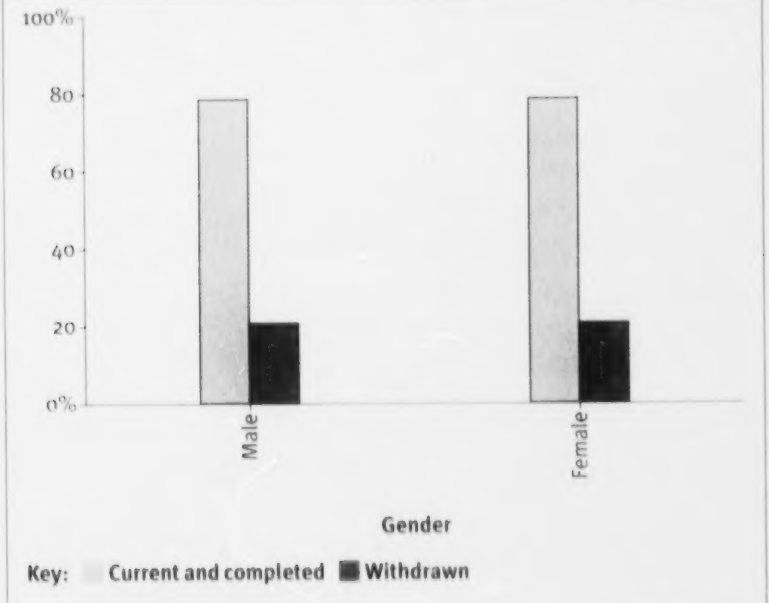
Figure 23 Student status – age group profile



Gender of respondents

Reflecting a similar bias in the FE student population, 44% of respondents were male and 56% female. Again, the proportion of withdrawn to current students for each gender is similar. Figure 24 shows that the proportions of current and withdrawn students were the same for male and female students, indicating that the sample is not skewed by gender.

Figure 24 Student status – gender profile



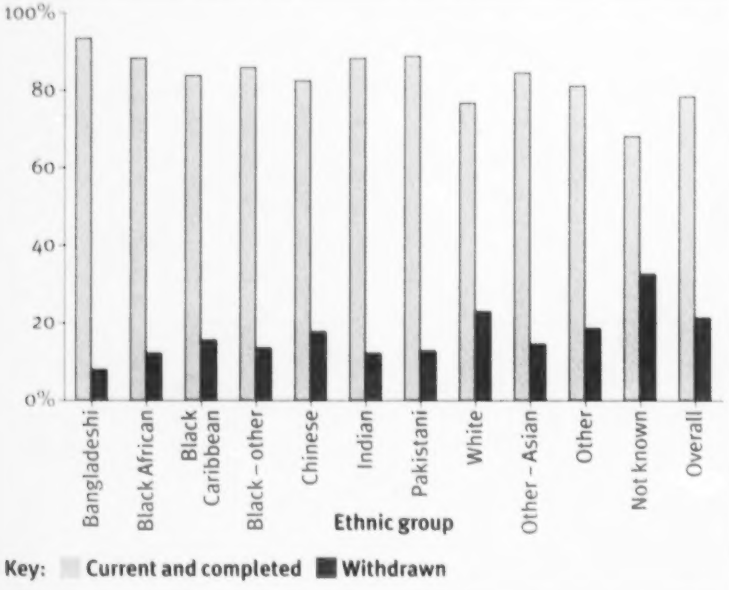
Ethnicity

The ethnic background of the respondents is broadly in line with the student populations surveyed. Just over three quarters (76.4%) of respondents are white. The combined categories of black students (black African, black Caribbean and black other) comprised 5.5% of respondents. Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi students comprised, respectively, 3.5%, 4.6% and 0.7% of respondents.

White students and those whose ethnic background was not known were slightly over-represented among respondents who had withdrawn. On the other hand, in the two colleges where white students comprised a minority (under one-third in both cases) the ethnicity of the withdrawn students was representative of that of the target population.

Figure 25 below shows the breakdown of current and withdrawn respondents in relation to their ethnic community backgrounds.

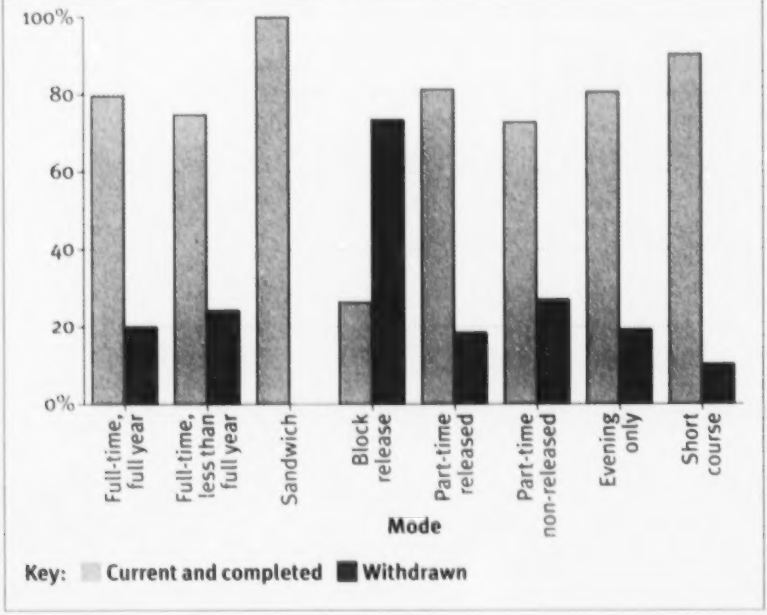
Figure 25 Student status – ethnicity profile



Mode of attendance

The mode of attendance of students in the sample reflects the focus of the research. Just over two thirds (68.0%) of respondents were enrolled on full-time programmes. The percentage on part-time released programmes was 5.9%, on part-time non released 12.5% and evening-only programmes 12.7%. The representation of students with other modes of attendance was negligible (i.e. full-time, less than full year, sandwich, block release and short course students). Part-time, non-released students were slightly over-represented and full-time and evening-only students slightly under-represented in the category of withdrawn students. Figure 26 below shows the proportion of current and withdrawn respondents by mode of attendance.

Figure 26 Student status, by mode of attendance



Conclusion

With the reservations noted above, the sample seems to be reasonably representative of the student populations which form the focus of this research. On the one hand, the profile of all respondents broadly reflects the profile of the target student population. On the other, the demographic profile of withdrawn students broadly matches the profile of current and completed students.

2 Variations between colleges

So far, we have been looking at aggregate survey data drawn from across the colleges included in this project. There were substantial variations between colleges, partly reflecting local circumstances and partly reflecting the focus selected for the colleges in the consultancy research. Two contrasting examples may suffice to illustrate this point.

General FE college (North West)

At a large general FE college in the north west region, the chosen focus was the whole student population. This college is referred to as GFE.NW. The college had already begun to implement a retention strategy. The survey included 260 students and was supplemented by an examination of statistical data and a number of meetings with staff and students. The issues raised by students in informal discussion included:

- courses not being as expected (volume of work, course inappropriate to student's objectives, more academic and more writing tasks than expected, changes made to courses)
- financial and domestic problems
- childcare problems
- students losing interest in courses.

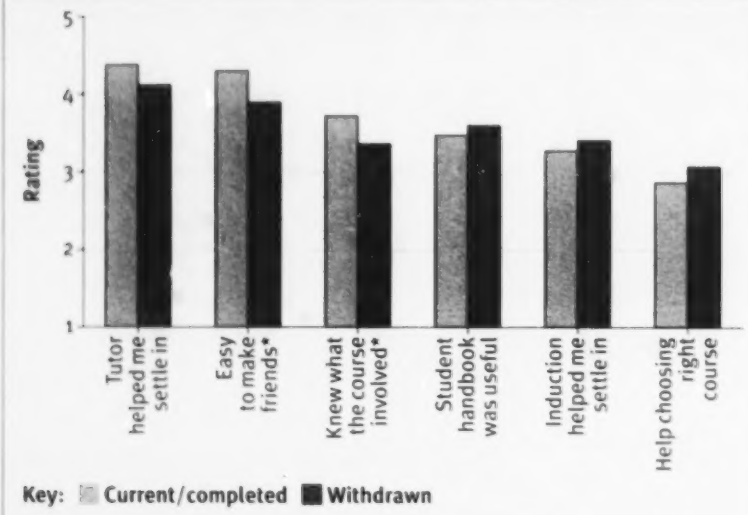
These issues were reflected and elaborated in the student survey.

Withdrawn students differed particularly from current students in that they were less likely to agree that:

- it was easy to make friends
- they had known what the course involved.

Responses concerning the start of courses are shown in Figure 27.

Figure 27 Help in starting the course (GFE college, NW)



Key: Current/completed **Withdrawn**

* indicates significant difference at 95% level of confidence

Rating
1
2
3
4
5
I was allowed to take the course I wanted*
I would encourage someone else to do my course*
The course was the right one for me*
The college treated me as an equal
I was satisfied with the quality of teaching*
I got on well with my teachers
My course was interesting*
My family circumstances had not changed during the course*
Teachers were always prepared for lessons
I had no health or personal problems during the course
The course was not too difficult for me*
I got on with other students
I felt safe and secure in college*
There was the right amount of coursework
College facilities were good
The college was convenient to get to
I got enough feedback on my assignements
The timing of my course was convenient*
College social life was good*
I got enough help with my coursework
I have not experienced financial hardship during the course
I found it easy to make enough time to study
I received enough financial help and guidance from college
Key: Current/completed Withdrawn
* indicates significant difference at 95% level of confidence

Figure 28 Evaluation of college experience (GFE college, NW)

On programme, withdrawn students were less likely than current to agree:

- *I was allowed to take the course I wanted (question 4)*
- *the course was the right one for me (question 1)*
- *my course was interesting (question 8)*
- *my family circumstances changed (question 6)*
- *the course was not too difficult for me (question 2)*
- *the timing of my course was convenient (question 10)*
- *college social life was good (question 12)*

Withdrawn students were more likely than current students to agree that:

- *they felt safe and secure in college (question 16).*

These responses are set out in Figure 28.

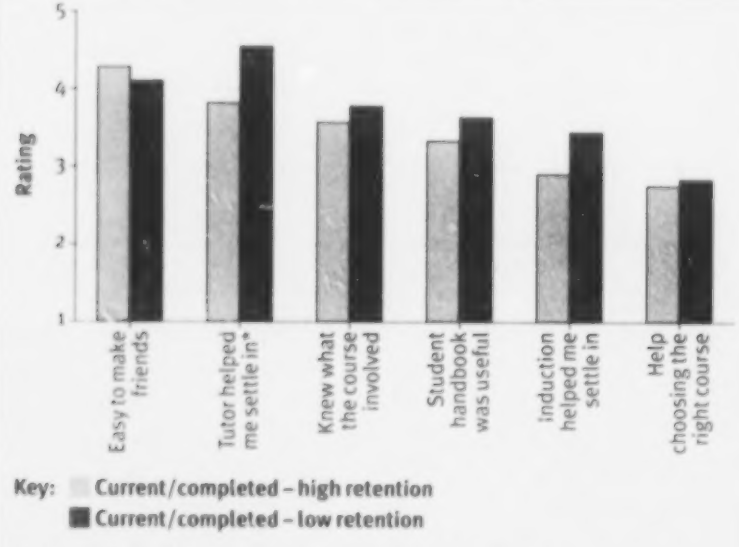
Overall, the picture that emerges from the aggregate data from GFE.NW is broadly similar to that for the project overall. At the level of courses with 'high' and 'low' retention rates, however, the responses are more equivocal and somewhat unexpected.

Thus, with all due regard to the appropriate degree of caution because of the relatively small numbers involved, the evaluation of aspects of course start seems to be more favourable on the part of both current and withdrawn students on courses with low retention rates (Figures 29 and 30). In other words, both current and withdrawn students on courses with low retention rates, recorded more favourable evaluations than those on courses with high retention rates – at least for the aspects of commencing the course.

If we compare the on-programme experience of current students on courses with high or low retention rates, there is greater variation (Figures 31 and 32). The issues which best differentiate the two types of course, are, in the eyes of current students, their evaluation of the quality of:

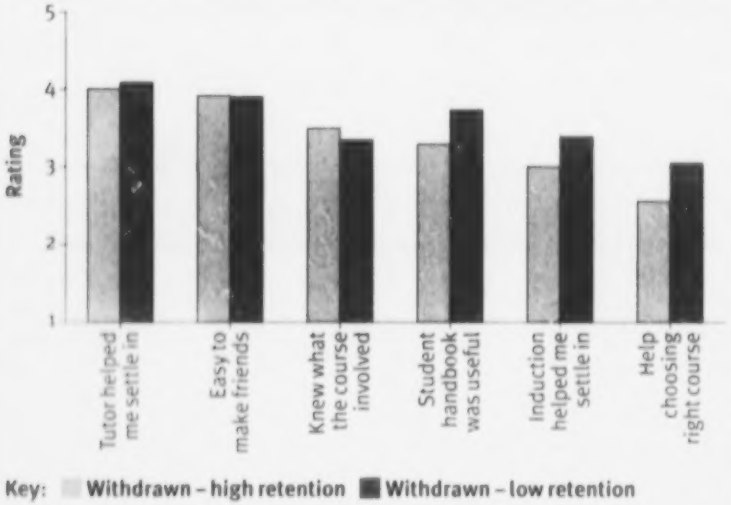
- college facilities
- college social life.

Figure 29 Help in starting the course, by course retention (GFE college, NW) – current/completed students only



* indicates significant difference at 95% level of confidence

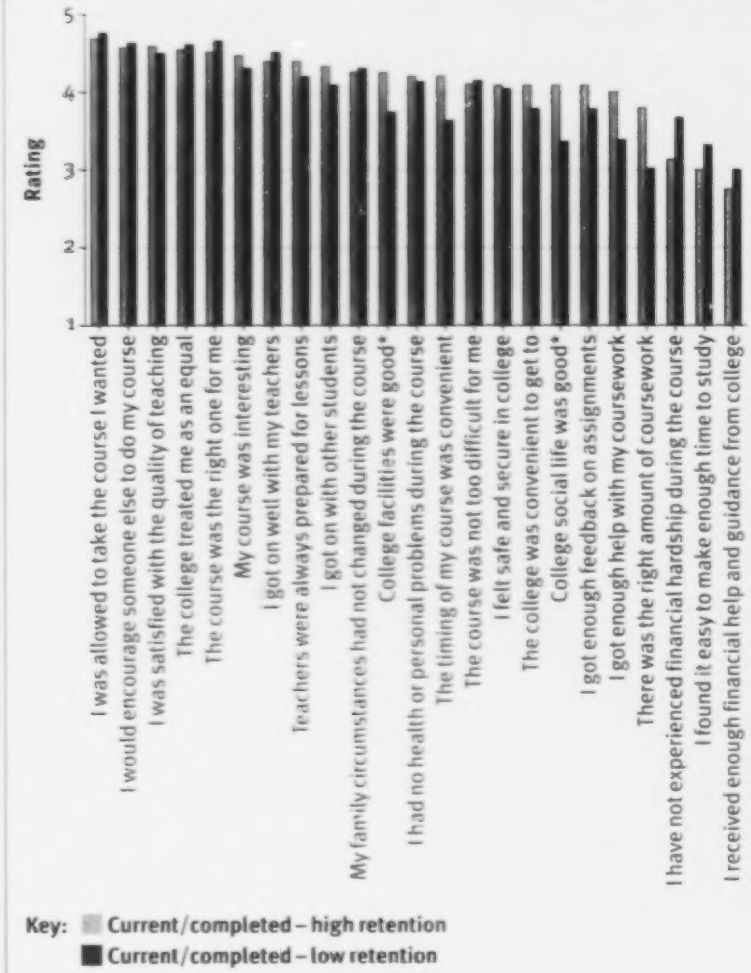
Figure 30 Help in starting the course, by course retention (GFE college, NW) – withdrawn students only



Key: Withdrawn – high retention ■ Withdrawn – low retention

* indicates significant difference at 95% level of confidence

Figure 31 Evaluation of college experience, by course retention (GFE college, NW) – current/completed students only


Rating
5
4
3
2
1
I was allowed to take the course I wanted
I would encourage someone else to do my course
I was satisfied with the quality of teaching
The college treated me as an equal
The course was the right one for me
My course was interesting
I got on well with my teachers
Teachers were always prepared for lessons
I got on with other students
My family circumstances had not changed during the course
College facilities were good*
I had no health or personal problems during the course
The timing of my course was convenient
The course was not too difficult for me
I felt safe and secure in college
The college was convenient to get to
College social life was good*
I got enough feedback on assignments
I got enough help with my coursework
There was the right amount of coursework
I have not experienced financial hardship during the course
I found it easy to make enough time to study
I received enough financial help and guidance from college
Key: Current/completed – high retention
Current/completed – low retention

* indicates significant difference at 95% level of confidence

Figure 32 Evaluation of college experience, by course retention (GFE college, NW) – withdrawn students only

Rating
1
2
3
4
5
I got on with other students*
I had no health or personal problems during the course
The college treated me as an equal
I would encourage someone else to do my course
I felt safe and secure in college
The college was convenient to get to
I got on well with my teachers
My course was interesting
College facilities were good
I was allowed to take the course I wanted
Teachers were always prepared for lessons
I was satisfied with the quality of teaching
I got enough feedback on my assignments
I got enough help with my coursework
The course was the right one for me
There was the right amount of coursework
The course was not too difficult for me
College social life was good
My family circumstances had not changed during the course
I received enough financial help and guidance from college
I felt safe and secure in college
The timing of my course was convenient
I have not experienced financial hardship during the course
Key: Withdrawn – high retention Withdrawn – low retention

* indicates significant difference at 95% level of confidence

In the eyes of withdrawn students, however, the aspect of college which most clearly differentiates courses with high from courses with low retention rates is their evaluation of student–student relationships. In courses with high retention rates, the characteristic 'I got on with other students' is scored very highly and indeed is scored by withdrawn students as highly as by current students. On courses with low retention rates, however, this aspect of college is scored much lower (although still positively).

General FE college (South East)

A rather different picture emerges from a larger general FE college in the south east (hence GFE.SE). Here, the focus was primarily on part-time adult students. Interviews with students and staff identified the following issues:

- late enrolments leading to early drop-out because of difficulties in catching up
- adult students 'don't feel they belong at college' and college support and ethos are perceived to be focused on younger and full-time students
- financial problems
- childcare problems
- difficult personal circumstances of some students
- problems about group cohesion on some courses.

Almost 600 students completed the questionnaire, most of whom (90%) had successfully completed or were currently completing their programmes. Over 95% of respondents were aged 19 or over and over 70% were from ethnic minority communities. Over two-thirds of students were paying no or a reduced fee; a high proportion (66%) lived less than 30 minutes away from the college.

In marked contrast to the other college, withdrawn and current students were equally willing to recommend their course to others and there was little to distinguish them in their opinion of college before starting their course.

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Withdrawn students were more likely than current students to agree that:

they had had health or personal problems

their course was boring.

They were less likely than current students to agree that:

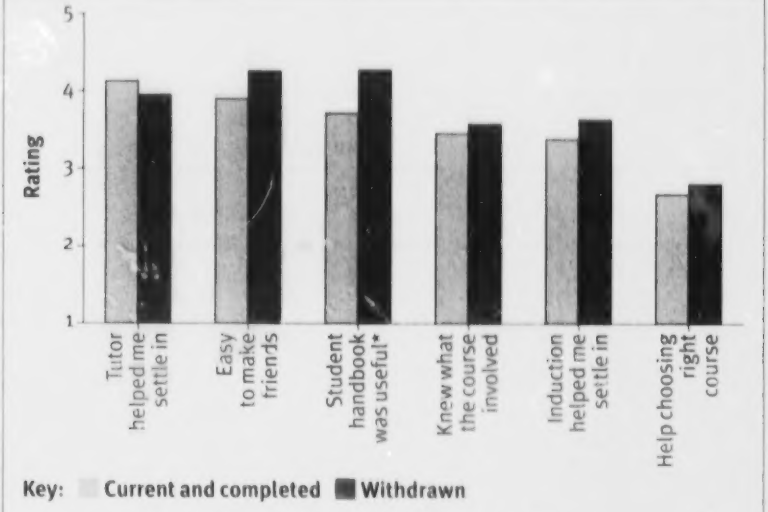
teachers were well prepared

they were satisfied with the quality of teaching

the location of the college was inconvenient.

The evaluations which differ quite markedly from those of the other college (see Figures 27 and 28) are shown in Figures 33 and 34.

Figure 33 Help in starting the course, by course retention (GFE college, SE)



Key: Current and completed ■ Withdrawn

* indicates significant difference at 95% level of confidence

Figure 34 Evaluation of college experience, by course retention (GFE college, SE)

Rating
1
2
3
4
5
I got on well with my teachers
I was allowed to take the course I wanted
My course was interesting*
The college treated me as an equal
I would encourage someone else to do my course
The course was the right one for me
Teachers were always prepared for lessons
I felt safe and secure in college
I was satisfied with the quality of teaching*
I got on with other students*
The course was not too difficult for me
My family circumstances had not changed during the course
I had no health or personal problems during the course
There was the right amount of coursework
College facilities were good
I got enough feedback on my assignments
I got enough help with my coursework
The college was convenient to get to
The timing of my course was convenient
College social life was good
I found it easy to make enough time to study*
I have not experienced financial hardship during the course
I received enough financial help and guidance from college
Key: Current/completed Withdrawn

* indicates significant difference at 95% level of confidence

In terms of the aspects of college that were liked most and those that were liked least, withdrawn students made a response which differed quite strongly from that made by students from other colleges (pp50-4). In the prevalent pattern, 'likes' are identified around twice as frequently as 'dislikes'. Relationships with teachers are included among 'likes' roughly three times more often than among 'dislikes'. At this college, however, withdrawn students spontaneously identified as many 'dislikes' as 'likes' and teachers and teaching were mentioned negatively rather slightly more frequently than they were mentioned positively. Figure 35 gives the full analysis:

Figure 35 Aspects of college most liked and liked least by withdrawn students at GFE college, SE

Aspect of college	Number of times mentioned	
	Liked most:	Liked least:
All	3	Nil
Teachers and teaching	16	19
Programme management (turnover, timetabling, etc)	5	8
College management (security, financial advice, communications)	2	6
Social factors/atmosphere	11	1
Outcomes of study (personal satisfaction, job, etc.)	4	1
Equipment/facilities	14	18
Location	2	2
Nothing identified	9	17

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3 Other research on retention

Studies of individual colleges

By far the largest category of research is being generated by individual colleges and adult education services as they seek to identify the reasons for drop-out and to improve retention. Because of their very practical and largely internal objectives, much of this work is largely unknown and unseen outside the college or adult education service which has created it. College research can sometimes be somewhat naive or uncritical – comprising little more than a short survey of a small number of students who have withdrawn. On the other hand, it can be both exemplary and inspiring: exemplary where it demonstrates a combination of rigour, professional sensitivity and engagement to students; inspiring because of its rich illustration and analysis and focus on action and improvement, often in the face of severe constraints in terms of time or resources. Examples of work which we have found particularly useful are:

- Bannister V (1996) *At-risk students and the 'feel good factor'* reports a detailed action research project with health and social care students
- Knowsley Community College (1995) *Retention project: annual report 1994-5* reports in some detail the outcomes of a college-wide retention strategy with full-time students
- Vick M (1997) *Student drop-out from adult education courses: causes and recommendations for reduction* reports details of a thorough study into the causes of drop-out amongst part-time adult students in a large adult education service
- McHugh J (1996) *Research project: applications, enrolments and withdrawals at High Peake College* investigates what happens between initial contact with students and ultimate placement on appropriate courses
- South East Essex College, Southend (1996) *Lifelong learning: creating successful adult learners* reports a sophisticated and complex action research project to improve retention among full-time adult students
- Medway J and Penney R (1994) *Factors affecting successful completion: the Isle of Wight College – a case study* the first major and robust investigation of persistence and drop-out at an FE college

- Brown H (1998) *Nature or nurture? Does tutoring increase retention on GNVQ Foundation programmes in FE colleges?* presents detailed findings for a group of student with high withdrawal rates across the sector
- Vallender J (1998) *Attendance patterns, an instrument of management* – a convincing analysis of at-risk factors and demographic aspects of drop-out.

We continue to look out for college-based research which we can bring to a wider community. If you are developing or have undertaken research in your college or adult education service, please use the networking form at the end of the book to tell us about it.

Youth Cohort Study

The Youth Cohort Study is a huge research project which has examined large and successive cohorts of young people as they move from full-time education into employment. It is primarily focused on this transition, but sheds some light on issues around persistence and drop-out. The work was initially sponsored by the Department of Employment and continues under the Department for Education and Employment.

The size of the sample (several tens of thousands of respondents), provides the opportunity to undertake substantial and detailed analyses of factors which promote or suppress participation in further education at 16, 17 and 18 and patterns of withdrawal, completion and success among young students who have remained in full-time education. The volumes which have been particularly useful in the present work include:

- Payne J (1995a) *Routes beyond compulsory schooling*
- Payne J (1995b) *Qualifications between 16 and 18: a comparison of achievements on routes beyond compulsory schooling.*

Given that this research is readily accessible, rich and available free of charge, it is perhaps surprising that FE sector institutions do not seem to make more use of it.

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Publications by funding and inspection agencies

The English Further Education Funding Council and its Welsh and Scottish equivalents have published a substantial amount of research and data which bear on retention issues. In England, these take the form of:

- inspection reports on individual colleges
- good practice reports on, for example, different curriculum areas
- national survey reports, for example on types of qualification
- performance data.

This work is obviously extremely useful. While retention and achievement are by no means the sole focus of inspection reports, a college that wants to implement and develop practice which promotes retention in a given curriculum area will almost certainly be using inspection reports as an invaluable source of secondary data.

Similarly, the considerable efforts involved in providing data returns for the ISR will progressively enable more penetrating and detailed analyses of patterns of student persistence and drop-out. As we shall see, however, the main disadvantages of the data currently in the public domain (for example FEFC 1997a, b, d and e) is that national level statistics tend to obscure huge variations between individual colleges.

Large-scale research into the causes of drop-out

Beyond the project reported here, there are essentially four other large-scale research projects on the causes of drop-out and persistence:

- BTEC (1993) *Staying the course* a study of a large cohort (2,170) of students who had withdrawn from full- and part-time BTEC courses.
- Barwuah A, Munday F 'Retention of students across different programmes' in Barwuah (1997) – a study of drop-out from eight urban colleges based on a survey of 835 current and withdrawn students.

- FEDA (1998) *Non-completion of GNVQs* a very detailed study of a large cohort of GNVQ students (3,391); this report effectively displaces the largely anecdotal studies of problems and issues associated with GNVQs; it provides a sophisticated analysis of the perceptions and experiences of students, the most detailed study to date in relation to a particular qualification and employs research methods which could readily be applied to other categories or types of qualification.
- Kenwright H (1996) *Developing retention strategies: did they fall or were they pushed?* and (1997) *Holding out the safety net: retention strategies in further education.* This is a two-part project sponsored by a training and enterprise council (TEC) and undertaken by a consortium of colleges in North Yorkshire led by York College of Further and Higher Education. The first report contains preliminary findings on the causes of drop-out; the second develops these in more detail and provides some succinct recommendations for improving strategies. Over 2,500 students were involved.

Qualitative research on improvement strategies

Given the relative novelty of this whole area, research on successful strategies is less readily available. Much of the published work has been produced by FEDA. It includes:

- Martinez P (1996) *Student retention: case studies of strategies that work* contains four detailed case studies from colleges which were among the first to develop and apply strategies to improve retention.
- Martinez P (1997) *Improving student retention: a guide to successful strategies* reports strategies which have been researched, designed, implemented and evaluated by over 30 colleges and adult education services.

- Martinez P (1998) *Staff development for student retention in further and adult education* a companion to the previous work, provides a detailed focus on staff and professional development devised by colleges and adult education services as integral components of their strategies to improve retention.

The Basic Skills Agency has published the following

- Basic Skills Agency (1997) *Staying the course* a summary of action research in 18 colleges investigating the relationship between improved support for basic skills and student retention and achievement. it builds on and extends *Building the framework* (BSA, 1996).

Secondary sources

The best general overview of action research on adult students is in McGivney (1996) *Staying or leaving the course*. This concentrates on adult students in further and continuing education but also includes some material on higher education. It provides a succinct and convenient summary of much of the research work on adult students which has languished in unpublished research dissertations.

The survey produced by NCVQ (1997) *Investigation of non-completion research* is concise but incomplete.

FEDA has also produced the following:

- Davies P (1996) *Within our control? Improving retention rates in further education* a useful overview of research to that time.
- Martinez P (1995) *Student retention in further and adult education: the evidence* now rather long in the tooth, but the discussion of research methods and the criticism of the way that many colleges and adult education services gather data are still pertinent.
- Martinez P (1997) *Student persistence and drop-out* (paper presented at BERA conference) mainly useful as a means of access to two comprehensive research projects in individual colleges which are otherwise unpublished.

Improving retention and achivement networking form

Personal details	
Name	
College/centre	
Address	
	Postcode
Telephone	Fax

Issues
What specific issues are you currently addressing?

Detach here

Evaluation

How are you evaluating outcomes?

Outcomes

What outcomes have you achieved or do you expect?

Thank you for completing this form. Please return to:
Paul Martinez, FEDA, North Warwickshire and Hinckley College,
London Road, Hinkley, Leicestershire LE10 1HQ
As FEDA undertakes further activities, publishes research and reports and offers training and dissemination events we will keep you informed.

Detach here

FEDA publication series

For further information please contact **Yvonne Corper,**
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Tel: 0171 962 1280 Fax: 0171 962 1266 e-mail: publications@feda.ac.uk

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4	Additional support, retention and guidance in urban colleges
5	Qualifications for the future: a study of tripartite and other divisions in post-16 education and training
6	FE: aspects of economic development

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Over 9,000 people had a hand in this report – students, teachers and managers from 31 colleges across the country. It is based on the largest study of student persistence and drop-out ever done in the UK.

The result is vivid and imposing evidence which challenges many widely held beliefs – such as 'drop-out is mostly caused by students' personal circumstances' – and demonstrates the crucial importance of local as well as national research.

Measures to improve curriculum design, pedagogy and student relationships have a greater impact on retention than measures to improve accommodation or equipment. *9,000 voices* therefore finally focuses on college information and quality systems and procedures, and offers recommendations for action.

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